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THE AFTER-MODE OF THE SELF: HELEN FIELDING AND THE INTEREST IN 'THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER' (BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY)¹

Keywords: *after-modernism, fairy-tale tradition*

Abstract: *Helen Fielding is not a very subtle novelist. Jane Austen – whose *Pride and Prejudice* she claims she is echoing in *Bridget Jones's Diary* – is oceans of sensibility away. While the Victorian novelist has an eye open to a future use of the stream of consciousness, the After-modernist Helen Fielding has both eyes willfully shut in order to avoid catching the faintest glimpse of it. Her *Diary* is a way of concealing, not in the least revealing, her heroine's feelings and thoughts. At her sincerest, *Bridget Jones* is only concerned with hiding her real nature from the reader. Fielding's suspense comes from the reader's finding the heroine out. All on his own and even – it would seem – against all the author's attempts to sidetrack him.*

*Helen Fielding writes the novel of a contemporary failure which ends with the prospect of the long-lost fairy tale. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is food for the fed-up reader at the turn of the third millennium: a reader who has seen too much, has mocked at and decoded too much, has heard too many abstract theories and has seen too much sex on the page. This reader will either kick the book for the screen, or force the tale to gratify his craving for love interest, for 'they lived happily ever after.'*

Helen Fielding is not a very subtle novelist. Jane Austen – whose *Pride and Prejudice* she claims she is echoing in *Bridget Jones's Diary* – is oceans of sensibility away. While the Victorian novelist has an eye open to a future use of the stream of consciousness, the After-modernist Helen Fielding has both eyes willfully shut to avoid catching the faintest glimpse of it. Her *Diary* is a way of concealing, not in the least revealing, her heroine's feelings and thoughts. At her sincerest, *Bridget Jones* is only concerned with hiding her real nature from the reader. Fielding's suspense comes from the reader's finding the heroine out. All on his own and even – it would seem – against all the author's attempts to sidetrack him.

The plot is highly unlikely, relying on old tricks of bringing about laughter without really being a plain joke. *Bridget Jones* is single (this being the tragedy the novel set out from at first to remedy). She is in her thirties. She is surrounded by tragedy: she hates her job; she works for a publishing agency whose boss is Daniel Cleaver (whom she has a crush on from the very first pages). Her immediate superior, Perpetua (philosophical name suggesting there is always someone in charge who can make your life miserable), keeps her busy, although she would much rather drink and go to parties, mourning her singleness in the process.

Considering she is an English graduate (from Bangor), we sensibly wonder – on our own, no clue and no hint from the author – what else if not books she might be interested in as a job. Unfortunately, her nonexistent inner life in the novel will not fuel any kind of sympathy along this line. We are encouraged to mock, to enjoy everyone else's mockery, laugh at its cruelty, but be careful about thinking.

Things change a little (but only superficially) when *Bridget* gets a job for a TV station, as a news reporter. She announces she might like to do that – spontaneity, a spontaneous sense of humour actually, is her huge gift – but we never see her relishing her intellectual activity. She claims she really wants to be

¹ Helen Fielding. *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Picador, 1996.

a 'career woman', yet we fail to see the career. She is so busy being funny that she simply has no time for the least intellectual joy. The author's mockery undermines her heroine at this point.

This is a first flaw of the novel. We read the diary of an intellectual who behaves like an ape. Was it Fielding's aim to prompt us to discover the tragedy behind the laughter? But, in that case, what could that tragedy be, exactly? Bridget never seems aware of her being pathetic and insufficient as a heroine with a career. She troops happily ahead, like an empty vessel, afraid it might spill an imaginary content.

Although surrounded by friends (hers, her parents'), she is completely alone.

Her parents' friends can only think of her biological clock, and the question that exasperates Bridget most is 'How's your love-life?'. These friends – whose names are not significant an actually interchangeable, since they are all a chorus of elderly people, standing for the previous generation, but the generation without whose obsession with the biological clock Bridget Jones and Mark Darcy would never have met.

Bridget's mother has her old friends, whom she almost swindles out of significant amounts of money, with the help of a new friend, Julio, a 'Portuguese tour operator' (p. 220), her lover during part of the year the novel narrates. The mother is 60. Bridget is significantly younger, but poor (she repeatedly cannot 'afford' a lot of things) and loveless. Things turn when Mark Darcy (very conveniently a lawyer) helps both mother and daughter, catches the robber, returns the money to the mother's friends and announces to Bridget the advent of love, which it seems she has never experienced. End of loneliness, we might suspect (although the novel ends only six days after the discovery of this love, so we hardly know what will become of it).

Bridget's own friends, on the other hand, can only think of their own bodies. They lose and retrieve sex-partners (families are as fragile as mere affairs), and they either talk about the misery of love or the advantages of feminism. Fielding even devises a homosexual, Tom, who is Bridget's best girlfriend. Unavoidably, we are reminded of *Sex and the City*, not just by a girl's gay best friend, but also by the artificial emotions the other friends arouse.

Bridget's friends buy her a meal on her birthday (when she lamentably fails as a cook), eat her (accidentally) 'blue soup' on another occasion, exchange useless Christmas gifts with her, share their love life with her and take more or less interest in her own, go to parties to which she is at first or in the long run invited (even though some are 'Marrieds' and few are 'Singletons'). She gets drunk with her women-friends, and the only confession she makes to them is the sole fact in the novel: Bridget is lonely because she is single. If we compare this to Elizabeth and the complicated web of tenderness and innuendo around her mystery (and Darcy's) in *Pride and Prejudice*, we can only gape at Helen Fielding's novel and wonder why she needs an audience if all she is determined to do is to make plain (gross) fun of a straw puppet.

The boyfriend has nothing to do with the notion of a friend.

A boyfriend is first and foremost, it would seem, a social must. Bridget does not want to go to parties alone any more, drive herself to her parents' home for holidays or sleep in her childhood single bed at Christmas, be asked about her love life by her parents' friends. She develops a theory according to which you can use your life if you do not share it with a partner: parents ask you to come over whenever they please, friends come over at all hours, strangers think you 'dysfunctional'.

A boyfriend is also a playmate, and the game is 'sex'. Daniel Cleaver, Bridget's first lover in this novel (one year in her life, definitely out of many – so there have been other lovers, of course), is incredibly funny and sexy. Does Bridget want more from him? Of course: she wants him to behave like a boyfriend, and he does. He spends weekends with her, watching cricket. He even accepts to go on a 'mini-break' with her, and he watches cricket there, too. He has sex with her, with more or less enthusiasm. Unfortunately he cheats on her and even gets married to the girl in question. Later on he returns and claims he has made a 'terrible mistake', so he wants Bridget back.

Considering the quality of this morally dubious playmate, Bridget is very upright: she refuses to go on having sex with him when he fails to act as a social boyfriend; she refuses to have sex with him again when he marries another and returns to her. There is only so much that a girl can do. But another man can do more: Darcy reveals to her that the reason why he appeared to dislike Daniel on the first

pages of the novel was that the man had slept with his wife only two weeks after Darcy's wedding. Would Austen have imagined such a plot? As Bridget herself fantasizes, would Austen have described Elizabeth and Darcy in bed, smoking after sex? I, for one, am very pleased the answer eludes me.

The main difference between Victorian Jane Austen and after-modernist Helen Fielding is the difference between love and sex. In Jane Austen's time, the heroes were in love. In Helen Fielding's time, the heroes are in (to) sex. Bridget faintly whispers the word love here and there, but she would not dream of going to the platonic lengths Austen's heroes go to. She either jumps in bed or the boy is just a friend, which boyfriends seldom are. Boys are either boyfriends or enemies, ready to marry the enemy (the more appealing girl). Love is a contest for a place in bed and in society (which it often boiled down to of old, but those who confessed to doing so in Jane Austen's age were the bad guys, no scruples, no souls).

Somehow romance is still there in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, though. We can hardly find out why, since the heroes' feelings have really nothing to do with it. The explanation why Daniel is not the chosen one while Mark is has a lot to do with the fact that Mark comes to the rescue of the damsel in distress: Mark Darcy is the only one who is willing to do something selfless for Bridget. Her own mother keeps using the very fact that he gave her 'the gift of life' as leverage. Mark breaks the cell of solitude, sympathizes with Bridget and helps her when she least expects it of anyone (even though his help is rather far-fetched). Bridget is grateful, desperate to find a mate, pushed by both her social and biological clocks. The novel ends before we can find out if this is real love for Bridget or another boyfriend in a long line.

Is family an ideal? The only future prospect of the novel is the projection of the heroine against the background of what she already knows: if she does marry Darcy, there is a possibility that they may turn out like her own family; in spite of differences in generation, expectations seem to be the same. Fielding has provided an ending to her novel in spite of her determination not to do so. If Bridget and Mark end up together, they may become another Mr and Mrs Jones/Darcy. Bridget allows herself to dream of children and vacations playing on the beach. Her diary is very angry with all Marrieds, but it is more than obvious that a husband and children is exactly what she dreams she will settle for.

How does Fielding mock at Bridget's parents? By building the entire comedy on them. On Bridget's mother, actually. The motto of the novel makes it very clear that, aside from Bridget (the passive author of the recorded tale), there is only one other character, the only active one, the mother:

To my mum, Nellie, for not being like Bridget's. The understatement obviously suggests that what Mrs Jones does goes against Bridget's expectations, irritating, humiliating, yet helping her to some extent. Mrs Jones is closer than any other character in the novel to Austen's world. She is a perfect counterpart of Mrs Bennet at the turn of the third millennium.

Jane Austen uses Mrs Bennet in order to make Elizabeth's qualities more obvious. Helen Fielding must have been aware of the fact that her Mrs Jones not only makes Bridget look worse, but she also swallows the whole plot and sort of kills her daughter as a heroine. The *Diary* is *her* story, not Bridget's. First she tries to 'fix' Bridget with Mark Darcy, hoping to help her start a family and lead a socially correct life. But she is not consistent in her behaviour. She begins by promoting the family and suddenly changes her mind. She meets improbable Julio (and other prospective lovers her own age), leaves her husband, starts her own TV show ('Suddenly Single'), even helps Bridget get her reporter's job, after which she mysteriously leaves for Portugal, whence Mark brings her back (after legal and detective efforts), and we find out Julio has extorted money from all her friends in exchange for nonexistent 'time-share apartments'. But neither is Julio the perfect villain, nor is she the innocent victim. Fielding's sense of humour gets very dense (clumsy?) here. When Julio learns that Mrs Jones is on the point of sleeping with her husband again (returning to her old ideal of a family), he rushes back to England and yells his love out loud: 'You sleep with my woman!' (p. 302) Mrs Jones vanishes with him upstairs, to calm him down, and returns with her blouse 'inside out' – which detail is noticed by her husband, whose joy at having his wife back is undiminished nevertheless.

Mrs Jones sees more action (improbable as it may be) than everyone else in the novel; she mars and mends a family, rushes to Portugal, is brought back by the police, goes to court and is exempt from charges, goes into and out of television, starts as a housewife, hideously changes into a career woman and meekly returns to family life when the year is over and the plot is about to end. None of the incidents

makes sense. Bridget's mother is as disagreeable and also as unlikely (exaggerated) as Elizabeth's mother, but much less realistic. Fielding has sacrificed verisimilitude to comedy.

The question is why is Helen Fielding wrong when she mocks at Bridget's mother? Subterraneously she is wrong because Bridget longs to become exactly what she seems to hate: if and when she marries Darcy, she may well turn into another Mrs Jones, and it is in the nature of things that she should. To imply – as the motto does – that not all mothers are like Mrs Jones (or daughters like Bridget) is to simply confirm the rule.

Theoretically, what Helen Fielding is trying to do here is stabbing the fairy-tale tradition while preserving love interest (not just sex interest), or, in other words, eating her cake and having it. The moment when Bridget meets her mate is supposed to be magic, and the whole plot is built to prepare the union suggested by the last few pages. Suspense grows from our expectation of this happy union. Bridget follows Elizabeth closely in her fervent wish to love and be loved. The two novelists part when Austen takes happiness seriously and Fielding smashes it under her foot. Can Bridget hope to become her mother? Can the numberless incongruous details and loose ends of the story melt in her mating happiness? Helen Fielding's reader will no longer be satisfied with a happy ending. That is why Fielding does not really end her plot. She cannot live without love, but we cannot help wondering if she can really live with it. Bridget ridicules the image of the happy family, but she can think of nothing she would like better than that.

One major point this *Diary* makes is to use a humorous style. The absence of 'I' as a subject when Bridget talks about herself, the absence of articles and first person possessives, the use of 'self' to replace 'myself', are all tricks meant to defamiliarize language, attract attention to its jocular use, destabilize routine in communication and stress the ironical tone. Here are a few examples:

9 a.m. Ugh. Cannot face thought of going to work. Only thing which makes it tolerable is thought of seeing Daniel again, but even that is inadvisable since am fat, have spot on chin, and desire only to sit on cushion eating chocolate and watching Xmas specials. (17)

Right. Determined to be v. positive about everything. Am going to change life: become well informed re: current affairs, stop smoking entirely and form functional relationship with adult man. (189)

4 a.m. Startling. One of the most startling events of life.

After got depressed on Friday Jude came round and talked to me about being more positive about things, bringing with her fantastic black dress for me to borrow for party. Was worried that might split or spill on the dress but she said she had lots of money and dresses because of top job and did not matter so not to worry about it. Love Jude. Girls are so much nicer than men (apart from Tom – but homosexual). (227)

11 a.m. In loose at work. Oh no. Oh no. On top of humiliating standing-up débâcle, found self horrible centre of attention at morning meeting today. (239)

These artifices – unlike Joyce's profound reordering of morphology and syntax – are superficial causes of laughter. Bridget's informal speech, faithfully rendered on page (like most after-modernists, Fielding makes a point of parading the most offensive words), is as entertaining and as unsubstantial as a soap bubble.

Bridget Jones's Diary is – as its style spells out profusely – a comedy, a comic rewriting (a comic prolongation into contemporaneity) of Jane Austen's romantic subtlety of the soul and mind. Unlike Austen, Fielding is anything but romantic. Love is stripped to sex. Bridget and Darcy have hardly had time to realize they like each other when they find themselves in bed, and the novel ends six days later, too late for Jane Austen (who would never have got so physical) and yet too early for this new millennium, when nothing is either certain or final for that matter. Austen ended her novel with a certainty:

Elizabeth's spirits soon rising to **playfulness** again, she wanted Mr. Darcy to account for his having ever fallen in love with her. 'How could you begin?' said she. 'I can comprehend your going on charmingly, when you had once made a beginning; but what could set you off in the first place?'

'I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. **I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun.**' 'My beauty you had early withstood, and as for my manners – **my behaviour to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil**, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?' 'For **the liveliness of your mind**, I did.'

'You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. **I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them.** Had you not been really amiable, you would have hated me for it; but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just; and in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There – I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it; and really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me – but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love.' (emphasis mine)

Having underlined the words which must have set Fielding going about debunking Austen's romance, we must admit that no contemporary reader would think more of Austen (who tied every knot in her story before she let it go) than of Fielding (who knows we have lived with endless stories for too long in order to allow any author to dictate to us what we should understand to the least detail).

This loose story, therefore, survives for two reasons. First, it recreates/rewrites/debunks a happy love-situation of the 19th century, and we are still greedy consumers of happy stories, however our way of telling them may have changed. Second, it refuses to be precise. There are parts of the story which die unused (a narrative negligence Austen would never have allowed in a text of hers). The story itself is hardly believable, by an effort of gullibility on the reader's part. And yet we do read and we read on breathlessly, so there must be some kind of suspense. It would be wrong to say, as Bridget herself states in a veiled form, that we can hardly wait to see Austen's love-story rewritten. We go on reading because of a literary quality which Austen did not possess: self-mockery, a tender view of clumsiness, the defeat of failure, the survival and gratification of hope... Whatever name we give it, it makes Helen Fielding's tale infinitely more appealing to a reader today than *Pride and Prejudice*. Contemporary laughter and extravagant story have won over 19th c narrative earnestness.

Helen Fielding's story covers a whole year, from January to December. The year is not mentioned, but can easily be inferred from a multitude of very recent and sometimes hard to understand (to a foreign reader) details: films, actors, books, shows, political events. It is narrated in the first person by the author of the diary. It is therefore supposed to be Bridget's voice talking to herself – but we feel she is performing for the readers' sakes, and the pressure of their need to understand prevents the novelist from omitting too many first-person pronouns, possessives, articles. Fielding defies grammatical usage for brief spaces, but makes sure that the reader does not need decoding in order to get her meaning. Joyce's ghost is still beckoning from afar.

The first page lists on two columns what Bridget 'will not' and 'will' do in the year that is just beginning. The most important of all is that she will 'Form functional relationship with responsible adult.' It announces that *Bridget Jones's Diary* has love interest at its core. A little modified, mocking at rituals of mating and social mating practices, but definitely there. The short version of it is: Bridget and Mark Darcy once 'played in the paddling pool' (12) when they were very little. On the first day of the year, they are both invited by common family friends at 'Una and Geoffrey Alconbury's New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet' (8). Mark is described to Bridget by her mother as "...one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced. (9)"

We learn later that he had married a woman who slept with Daniel Cleaver two weeks after their wedding. We also learn that he is one of the most eligible bachelors, according to some paper Bridget happens to read. For the time being (when Bridget is first invited by her mother to the event and does not really want to go), she retorts she does not 'need to be fixed up' (9). They meet, however, and get on each

other's nerves. They seem to ignore or miss one another several more times, and Bridget strikes Mark in the meanwhile as 'bizarre' (see Austen's 'liveliness' of Elizabeth's mind). When Mrs Jones is threatened to spend years in prison because of Julio (who extorted money from the Darcys as well), Mark puts in an appearance as the Knight in Shining Armour. He saves Mrs Jones from prison and Bridget from the burden of dysfunctional parents. Then, precisely one year after their first meeting, at the same New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet, at last, he claims her:

Why did you bother doing all this?'

'Bridget,' he said. 'Isn't it rather obvious?'

Oh my God.

When we got upstairs it turned out he had taken a suite. It was fantastic, v. posh and bloody good fun and we played with all the guest features and had more champagne and he told me all this stuff about how he loved me... (p. 306)

Jane Austen takes care of the effect of Elizabeth and Darcy's wedding on all the characters, and does not even describe them settled down together. Bridget and Mark hop in bed. Times have changed and so has the narrative zest. And yet, in spite of Virginia Woolf declaring that love interest was not necessary to the story any longer, what else could we say except, 'Love is dead, long live love'? Helen Fielding's 1996 novel demonstrates to all those who read it breathlessly that they are – to use a slang term – suckers for romance.

Intertextuality is inevitable in a novel that aims at reduplicating the pattern of a love story already written once. The Modernists Joyce and Eliot discovered it with grim earnestness; with method and at ease, they mocked at literature already written. After-modernist Helen Fielding – a literary age later – mocks at the mockery. She takes lightly what Modernists held most dear, the privilege of defying, of debunking all conventions. She behaves as if convention had never existed, as far as she is concerned, so everyone is free to use (and abuse) every text ever:

It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party. It's like being called Heathcliff and insisting on spending the entire evening in the garden, shouting 'Cathy' and banging your head against a tree. (13)

Helen Fielding is very keen on loudly announcing the death of the fairy-tale narrative tradition, while her heroine wants it back with all her might:

Oh God. Valentine's Day tomorrow. Why? Why? Why is entire world geared to make people not involved in romance feel stupid when everyone knows romance does not work anyway. Look at royal family. Look at Mum and Dad. (49)

'Romance' may not work, but each generation has expectations that must be fulfilled. The feeling that the fairy-tale does not work comes to Fielding from the fact that the two stages – expectation and post-expectation – are reversed. Bridget's parents are supposed to be in a post-expectation stage, calm and content; on the contrary, they are as expectant and insecure as a teenager. Bridget, on the other hand, is fully entitled to expectation, but she is so disappointed by Daniel that she almost misses her chance with Mark. The reader, actually, definitely misses the reason why those two come together. But that is caused by poor characterization in the first place.

Comparing the description of after-sex by a female-after-modernist (Fielding) and by a male one (David Lodge), we find that the female is harsher and crueller. David Lodge is merely dry and ironic when he makes his heroine (Robyn Penrose) silence Vic Wilcox with the words: "Oh, shut up about last night, she said. That was just a fuck..."

Helen Fielding has a much heavier load of bitterness in her own view of after-sex with a much-wanted Daniel Cleaver:

6 p.m. Oh joy. Have spent the day in a state I can only describe as shag-drunkenness, mooning about the flat, smiling, picking things up and putting them down again. It was so lovely. The only down points were 1) immediately it was over Daniel said, 'Damn. I meant to take the car into the Citroën garage,' and 2) when I got up to go to the bathroom he pointed out that I had a pair of tights stuck to the back of my calf. (60)

Prince Charming is not charming any more. He is self-centered, insensitive and disagreeable, and a female starved for love can be bitchier about details. She says so herself:

5 a.m. Oh God, am so unhappy about Daniel. I love him. (77)

Thirty pages further on, she recants:

I am not in love with Daniel any more. I am free. (105)

What Fielding's heroes mean by love is an incredible vulnerability, which is spasmodically mocked at with next to no humour at all. Whenever Bridget is assailed by misery, she gets drunk. Her thoughts are reduced to mispronounced words. We could certainly use a bit of her stream of consciousness from time to time. All she can offer is an interpretation of what goes on between Darcy and Elizabeth as 'shagging, or, rather courtship.' (246) She may not be aware, but she finds herself blaming her own view:

8.55 a.m. Just nipped out for fags prior to getting changed ready for BBC *Pride and Prejudice*. (...) The basis of my addiction, I know, is my simple human need for Darcy to get off with Elizabeth. (...) I would hate to see Darcy and Elizabeth in bed, smoking a cigarette afterwards. That would be unnatural and wrong and I would quickly lose interest. (247)

Many people would and do, too. But this is precisely what Helen Fielding does, as an alternative to Jane Austen's game of platonic emotions.

The reason for Fielding's bitter, disabused physicality is the fact that Bridget feels she is totally undesirable, nothing works out, nobody wants her, her boy-friend cheats on her and then marries the girl, her ex-boy-friend is getting married as well, she feels she is 'no good at anything. Not men. Not social skills. Not work. Nothing.' (224), she has 'no one to love or have fun with' (246), and the sequel is as follows:

Mum rang up and I tried to talk to her about how difficult it is being a woman and having a sell-by date for reproduction unlike men, but she just said, 'Oh, honestly, darling. You girls are just so picky and romantic these days: you've simply got too much choice. I'm not saying I didn't love Dad but, you know, we were always taught, instead of waiting to be swept off our feet, to "expect little, forgive much." And to be honest, darling, having children isn't all it's built up to be. I mean, no offence, I don't mean this personally but given my chance again I'm not sure I'd have...'
Oh God. Even my own mother wishes I'd never been born. (196)

As her gay friend puts it, 'we're all psychotic, single and completely dysfunctional' (265) – which is a very apt description of any after-modernist hero. In Bridget's words, at the end of the year (and of the novel, implicitly):

1 a.m. Totally alone. Entire year has been failure. (299)

Helen Fielding writes, then, the novel of a contemporary failure which ends with the prospect of the long-lost fairy tale. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is food for the fed-up reader at the turn of the third millennium: a reader who has seen too much, has mocked at and decoded too much, has heard too many

abstract theories and has seen too much sex on the page. This reader will either kick the book for the screen, or force the tale to gratify his craving for love interest, for ‘they lived happily ever after.’