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A Love That Lasts: Jane Austen's Argument for a
Marriage Based on Love in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

During the period of Regency England, a woman's life was planned for her before she was born, and her place in society was defined by her marital status. Before she was married, she was her father's daughter with a slim possibility of inheriting property. After she was married, legally she did not exist; she was subsumed into her husband with absolutely no legal, political, or financial rights. She was someone's wife; that is, if she was fortunate enough to marry because spinsters had very few opportunities to earn enough money to live on alone. Therefore, it was imperative that women marry. It often did not matter what a man may look like or how he acted; however, it was essential that he be a man of equal or more wealth. Rather than marrying for love, women sought husbands as means for financial security. The pressures of society led many women to pursue empty sexual passions in a desperate attempt to secure husbands. In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen expresses her idea that marriage should not be based on the pressures of society but rather on sincere love and acceptance of the other person. Through the contrast of other loveless relationships, Austen convinces her readers that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have found a truly successful marriage with security, money, *and* passion; they are in a marriage based on true love and respect for one another. Through the novel, Austen portrays the idea that women of Regency society should pursue a relationship of mutual understanding and love rather than one that only provides financial security or empty sexual passion.

A Love That Lasts

Jane Austen's Argument for a Marriage Based on Love in *Pride and Prejudice*

Marriage was the word on the tip of almost every woman's tongue during the period of Regency England. If a woman of the proper age was single, she either tried to quickly find a husband or suffered the rest of her life under the title of "old maid." In the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen created characters to illustrate that the current obsession women had of marrying for security and wealth might have seemed necessary based on the circumstances of society, but in reality women should not base marriages simply on the pursuit of a comfortable life. Through the character of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen illustrates that women can marry for passionate love while also having the many other securities of a home and wealth. By the end of her novel, it is clear that Darcy and Elizabeth not only have a clear mind in their discretion on whom to marry, but they also find a loving partner. While there are seemingly successful marriages through the characters of Lydia and Charlotte, these characters do not experience the same amount of passion and understanding. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen suggests through the character of Elizabeth that women need not marry only for security or money, but rather women should be careful in choosing a spouse and marry based on mutual understanding and love.

Marriage Customs During Regency England

Regency England (1811-1820) was a time of strict social hierarchy, specifically in the area of gender roles. Men held more legal, political, and financial rights in marriage, while women were not allowed as many privileges. According to historian Deborah

Gorham, most daughters, especially from upper-middle-class families, grew up being prepared for “domesticity”; just like their mothers before them, they went “from their father’s home to that of their husband” (31). Many of these women had little say in their choice of a husband, and they often found themselves in marriages based on the choices of their parents. Others may have been able to avoid an arranged marriage but still felt the pressure of finding a husband that fit their family’s standards of wealth and position. It is clear that the Regency period was not a time for women to find independence or seek marriages full of romance, but rather it was time for a woman to find a secure, financially stable husband and produce male heirs.

A Male-Dominated Society

The foundational reasons behind the dependence of women on the men of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rests in the society structure that fostered a male-dominated society that people believed benefitted the women. Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* says that “by marriage...the legal existence of the woman is suspended” (746). At the point of marriage, the husband and wife became one person, with the man as the leader. As a result of society-based expectations, men assumed the responsibility of the morals of their family. English historian Lawrence Stone claims that the Crown granted the man assumed power, delegating him as the authority figure of the family as a metaphor for the power the king holds over the people of the state (158). These ideas shaped the beliefs of Regency society. According to Joan Perkin’s *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, social customs in Regency England that placed women beneath men were held to be for their own benefit and protection (1). Some people within Regency society believed that women were the

weaker sex physically and emotionally, so they naturally needed to depend on a stronger man. According to the law, the married woman became a “*feme covert*” and performed all of her actions under the “wing, protection, and cover” of her husband (Blackstone 746). Because women were understood to be the weaker sex, laws placed them beneath male authority figures.

In addition to the foundational values of a male-based society, Regency England promoted male authority through property exchange and educational opportunities. Historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall claimed that the family dynamic made male dominance evident “through inheritance and naming practice” (31). Due to the law of primogeniture, land was passed down between families to the eldest son; aside from the unique cases of widows with no male heirs, most women were unable to inherit land. Even when they did bring land into the marriage, the husband still ruled over the property. Educational advantages for men also made women appear to be inferior (Stone 158). Parents tended to invest more money in education for their sons, and the daughters were left to rely on basic education from “unpaid kin and friends” (Davidoff and Hall 291). As a result of lacking education opportunities, women depended heavily on the family around them and in turn learned to depend on their husbands. Women were dependent not only for financial needs, but also for protection from the outside world they had not fully experienced (292). For many women, the only way to experience life and improve their social status was through marriage (Olson 15). While marriage forced many to give up their “worldly possessions” (Davidoff and Hall 187), women had few options in the Regency society.

Because a woman could not gain stability on her own, marriage was essential for women in that it provided them the potential to have financial security for the rest of their lives. Families made it their priority to have their daughters well married; they would throw numerous balls and spend large sums of money to showcase their daughters and give them opportunities to meet suitors (Perkin 6). After marriage, the man became responsible for all areas of his wife's life from finances to her behavior in public places (2). Most families worked hard to ensure their daughters married well to ensure that she would be cared for when the parents passed away. Marriage was also a strategic way for families to make connections with other families that held more power within their society (5). This practice was not only essential for the daughter's success in life; marriage was also a method for providing financial security to her family as well.

The Role of the Dreaded Spinster

As a result of male-dependence, many women felt pressured into the idea of marriage because they were "unwilling to remain a burden on their family" (Davidoff and Hall 325). Without marriage, a woman was forced to remain in her parent's house throughout her entire life, continuing her humiliating childlike dependence (Perkin 4). Women also desired marriage in order to avoid the stereotypes that came with the idea of being a single woman. In *Jane Austen: A Companion*, Josephine Ross claims that many people in the Regency society associated the single woman as someone with a tendency of being poor (9). Single women were often referred to as "old maids," providing a source of amusement to those around them (131). Many times, people would pity and laugh at the single women, mocking them for being unable to fulfill the ultimate goal of the Regency woman. While some women were able to accept these stereotypes, many felt

the expectations added to the pressures they felt in the society around them; the fear of child-like dependence and living as a source of amusement drove women to assume marriage was their only option.

Yet for most women, the only option in life was marriage. Women did not have the means to be picky in choosing their spouses. Society assumed that “[m]arriage was the life plan of most women, and the single state a fate to be avoided like the plague” (Perkin 3). In a male-based society, marriage was the woman’s main means of survival. Most women during this period found marriage to be liberating and enjoyable, specifically because it freed them from being a burden to their parents (3). Many women did not want to live their lives as old maids in the home of their parents and after that, their brothers. Historian Bridget Hill says that unless a woman learned a skill or trade, marriage was the only option (44). From the examples of marriage that surrounded their lives as well as the pressures of knowing that marriage was their path to independence from their parents and financial stability, women felt constant pressure to find a husband.

Jane Austen’s Life

Jane Austen was included under the label of the under-privileged woman in the Regency era: she was an “old maid.” Society considered her father to be “landed gentry,” meaning he owned a small estate out in the country (Perkin 74). George Austen’s income came from “the combined tithes [the parsonages] of Steventon and the neighboring village of Deane” in addition to a small profit he earned from farm produce (Tomalin 4). Just before Jane was born, he also started taking in pupils, using the extra space in the parsonage for a small school (Tomalin 4). Jane Austen spent the first twenty-five years of her life in the Steventon Parsonage, located in a “small rural village” (Austen-Leigh 23).

Judith Newton believes that Austen's letters make it clear she was no different than other women of her time period; she had five brothers who, unlike her, had "access to work that paid, access and inheritance and preference, and access to the independence, the personal power, that belonged to being prosperous male" (27). While her brothers loved her dearly and cared for her, Austen was still a Regency woman that was expected to seek marriage for stability (35). While this goal may have been what was expected of Austen, she spent most of her life rejecting the idea of simply marrying for security. Marriage may have been a popular idea in society as well as in her own writings, but it was not a topic that Jane Austen had personal knowledge of because she remained single throughout her entire life. Despite her disconnect from an actual marriage, she was very observant of others around her, and offered wise advice on marriage to her loved ones, specifically in letters to her niece Fanny. There were a few periods in Austen's life when she came close to marrying, but she never made that trip down the aisle.

Austen's Lost Lovers

While she never married, Austen experienced her fair share of failed loves in her lifetime. By the age of twenty, Austen was no stranger to the practice of flirtation. Her first major encounter with love (that is evident to scholars) was with the young Mr. Tom Lefroy. John Halperin's essay discusses how Austen freely shared information with her sister about Tom's flirtatious behavior, telling Cassandra to "imagine to [herself] everything that is most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together" (21). Austen admired Tom's quiet charm, and while at first she was the one leading their love affair, Tom made little effort to stop to her advances. They were constantly together at balls, and laughing and dancing together more than what was

normal for an unmarried couple (Honan 107). While Tom seemed to enjoy her attention at social gatherings, his disinterest was evident in the fact he avoided seeing Austen alone. In a letter to her beloved sister, Cassandra, Austen reveals that on one occasion Tom actually fled the room when she called on his aunt's house where he was staying (Le Faye 1). Even though her sister gave her many warnings, Austen let herself fall quickly in love with Tom. Even though Tom appeared to care very little for Austen, he later admitted in his old age that he had loved her, in a "boyish love" (Tomalin 120). The couple's growing romance was halted when Tom's aunt quickly sent him away to Ireland in an effort to break them apart. Austen never saw him again (Halperin 721). Aside from the fact that their contrasting social classes would not allow them to marry, people also wondered if Mrs. Lefroy sent Tom away as a way to protect Austen from continuing to be a victim of his "philandering" (Tomalin 121). While this brush with love was brief, the experience shaped Austen's new understanding of the pains of love; she carried this knowledge with her as she continued writing.

After her relationship with Tom ended, Austen encountered a few other surface-level experiences with young men that could not seem to win her affection in the way that Tom did. There is a brief mention in her letters of an attraction to a Mr. Edward Taylor, but that was soon extinguished when he married someone else (Le Faye 27, 59). At the age of twenty-two, Austen met the Reverend Samuel Blackall; he was at the point in his career as a clergyman in which he desperately needed a wife (Honan 114). Despite Mrs. Lefroy's attempts to pair Austen and Blackall, the relationship remained one-sided (Halperin 724). Blackall eagerly made his "needs and hopes heavily obvious" but was unable to woo Austen (Tomalin 131). Eventually, he began to understand her indifference

toward him, and their potential relationship quickly faded. Even though he wrote to Mrs. Lefroy that he planned to visit at Christmas in order to place himself closer to the Austen family, his realization of Austen's lack of affection for him kept him from returning (Tomalin 131). The seemingly closest encounter Austen had with a love similar to what she had with Lefroy appears to have been with an unnamed clergyman in the summer of 1801. Their romance reached a level that had the entire Austen family expecting a proposal, and reports from her sisters appeared to suggest she would have happily said yes. Tragically, soon after the summer holiday ended, Cassandra received word from the clergyman's brother that Austen's potential fiancé had passed away (Halperin 728), and Austen was left single once again. These few encounters with potential husbands never seemed to work in Austen's favor, and she moved forward into her late twenties as a single woman.

After the tragedy of her father's death, the hope of marriage appeared once again in the winter of 1802. During this time, the Austen sisters found themselves developing a close friendship with the Bigg sisters, who also had a younger brother named Harris. He was to be the heir of their family estate, and in the Bigg sisters' minds, Harris and Austen would be a perfect match (Tomalin 181). Not only would the match mean security for Austen, but it would also move her to a home within miles of her family and enable her to ensure her parents comfort later in life (182). While the two were not exactly in love with each other, Harris decided to propose to Austen as a result of encouragement from his sisters as well as his determination that Austen would make a good wife (Tomalin 181). Enamored with the idea of a comfortable home and providing security for her loved ones, Austen accepted Harris' proposal (Honan 194). Although it was a convenient

match, Austen spent the entire night after the proposal reevaluating her decision; in her mind, the only real comparison for love that she had in her life was Lefroy, and when putting that affair next to her relationship with Harris, there was no comparison. The next morning, Austen pulled Harris aside and informed him that she could no longer accept his offer. While she was grateful and honored by his proposal, she realized “esteem and respect” were not enough for a marriage (Tomalin 182). In the time of the Regency era, this decision could have come across as extremely selfish. At the age of twenty-seven, a marriage to Harris would have freed her from becoming a potentially burdensome spinster to her entire family (Honan 193). Despite these realities, Austen still went forward with the decision to not marry Harris. The change of heart caused a sudden distance in the friendship she had developed with the Bigg sisters, and she was incredibly embarrassed and grieved for misguiding them (197). In spite of the consequences, Austen still chose to value love and affection over ideas of comfort, convenience, and ultimately, financial security.

In the years to follow, as Austen aged, she found the prospects of marriage becoming slimmer and slimmer. Five and a half years after the incident with Harris, Austen faced another offer of marriage when she visited her brother, Edward. Edward’s brother-in-law, Edward Bridges, proposed to Austen while she was visiting, and while she was honored, she declined the offer (Halperin 732). A few months shy of her thirty-eighth birthday, Austen encountered another prospect of love on another visit with her brother, this time with Stephen Lushington. While Austen may have fallen in love with his well-spoken manners and charm, her hope was quickly struck down with his departure; he had clearly not reciprocated the admiration felt by Austen (733). Just a

couple of years later, while working through negotiations with publishers and her agent, Henry Austen, Austen met Henry's business associate, Mr. Seymour. When Henry took ill to his bed for a few days, Austen dined a few nights alone with Mr. Seymour; these nights "comically"—as Austen puts it—resulted in a proposal that she refused and never took very seriously (734). As a result of Henry's medical condition, Austen called on a talented physician by the name of Charles Thomas Haden, who was then just twenty-nine years old (734). The pair developed an intimate friendship, and while Austen's writings made it clear she was infatuated with the doctor, he did not return the feelings, and she was forced to accept friendship from him instead (735). Because she would soon begin to suffer the effects of illness, Austen did not encounter in any more love affairs in the rest of her short years.

Austen's Thoughts on Marriage

Even though Austen remained single, it does not appear through her letters and novels that she was against the idea of marriage; she was simply against the idea of marrying for the wrong reasons. Many women of the Regency period married men based on their desire to find security and comfortable happiness. Austen would not settle for just any man, and it was clear in her letters to her loved ones that she did not think anyone should settle on the basis of comfort. The most impactful words of wisdom that she gave on marriage were found within her letters to her beloved niece, Fanny. She acknowledges that marriage is the best way to find financial security in life, but she states that “nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without love” (LeFaye 299). Hazel Jones’ book, *Jane Austen and Marriage*, quotes Austen saying that the hasty matches made in her society often lead to misery and discontentment (15). In her novels, she makes her beliefs of marriage evident. All of her heroines know the meaning of “ardent love,” and Austen makes it clear through her characters that she has a very “high ideal of love that should unite a husband and a wife” (Halperin 732). Despite countless offers of marriage that would have provided her comfort and security, Austen’s high ideal of love drove her to continue on as a single woman. While Austen was aware of the consequences of the single life, she stressed the importance of affection between a husband and wife. Austen emphasized her creed about love “that there must be no bargaining in it and no marrying without it” (Byrde 285). While she never had the chance to live out this love in her own life, Austen lived it through the romantic relationships of her characters in each of her novels.

Statements on Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

Many of Austen's novels comment on marriage and provide countless examples of young women desperate for love, but none seem to compare to the infatuation with the idea of marriage that is found in her most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. This novel delighted Austen more than any other in that she was able to provide an example of a woman with strong feelings living successfully the Regency era (Honan 315). The novel's central theme focuses on happiness, and in most of the characters' minds, that happiness can only be found within the comforts of a successful marriage (320). The majority of the characters in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are obsessed with the idea of young women finding men to marry. The opening lines of Austen's novel are famous and satirical: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (5). The novel clearly refers to Austen's contemporaries' attitudes toward marriage as a woman's only option in life, specifically in the character of Mrs. Bennet and her desperate attempts to find husbands for her daughters. The novel centers on the Bennet sisters (as well as the other women) seeking successful marriages. Through the character of Elizabeth, Austen expresses her central theme of marrying for love regardless of the strict structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth century societies.

Mrs. Bennet as the Quintessential Mother Figure of the Regent Middle Class

As the mother of five daughters, Mrs. Bennet's entire life revolves around having her daughters married. Mrs. Bennet had "very few other thoughts in her head" aside from the desire to have her children wed to respectable men (Waldron 39). When readers first see Mrs. Bennet's character in the novel, Austen reveals that "the business of [Mrs. Bennet's] life was to get her daughters married" (Austen 7). According to Lloyd W.

Brown, Mrs. Bennet possesses stereotypical perspective of women's roles in life, and this quality limits her role as wife to her husband as well as a mother (337). She focuses her understanding on the idea that in order to be successful, a woman must marry, ultimately becoming in order to become a possession of her husband. While she is a character that is mocked by many (including her own husband), she is not as misled as she might seem to be. In the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth asks her mother if marriage is all she thinks about, and Mrs. Bennet replies by saying "[w]hen you have five daughters, tell me what else will occupy your thoughts" (Moggach). As mother of a family of five girls, Mrs. Bennet knows that the prospect of inheritance for her daughters is out of the question. Newton's article articulates the fact that "[s]ingle men have a distinct mobility and a personal power that daughters do not" (28). The only hope girls have for security in life is through marriage, so it is only natural that Mrs. Bennet is slightly obsessed with having her daughters married for their security as well as her own; the reader is not completely unsympathetic for Mrs. Bennet's plight.

Mrs. Bennet makes her life mission evident in her multiple, desperate attempts to place her daughters in the spotlight to be seen by male suitors; as a result, many see her as a desperately anxious woman obsessed with finding prospects to benefit her daughters. One of her primary methods of keeping her daughters as front runners in the community is keeping track of the latest news. If a man "in need of a wife" is visiting the area, Mrs. Bennet wastes no time in finding ways to expose the man to her daughters. In the first few pages of the novel, she begs her husband to call on the new occupant of nearby Netherfield, Mr. Bingley. Not only does she already know that Mr. Bingley recently came to view the large mansion and has decided to move into it, but she also knows that

he is “[a] single man of large fortune, four or five thousand a year” (Austen 6). Later in the novel, Mrs. Bennet is so desperate to have Jane get to know Mr. Bingley that she sends her on horseback to his house to dine with his sisters when there are signs of rain. By the next morning, the family is informed that Jane is ill and on bed rest at Netherfield. Despite Mrs. Bennet’s delight, Mr. Bennet mocks her by saying if Jane was to die, Mrs. Bennet could be comforted by the fact she died “all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under [her] orders” (32). In addition to forcing Jane on Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet also shows her desperation to have her daughters married through insisting that Elizabeth marry Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennet believes it to be an ideal match because as the oldest male heir in the family, Mr. Collins is the one that will inherit the Bennet estate; Mrs. Bennet tells Elizabeth she does not have a choice. When Elizabeth refuses the proposal, Mrs. Bennet is infuriated, calling her an undutiful child and threatening that she will never speak to Elizabeth again (111). These desperate attempts prove that Mrs. Bennet is insistent on finding husbands for her daughters so that they are able to financially provide not only for themselves, but also for the entire family.

Another reason behind much of the mockery of Mrs. Bennet is her tendency to act outrageously and outside of the normal standards of society; in reality, these actions usually are the result of another desperate attempt to have her daughters wed. Mrs. Bennet is ill-mannered at multiple points in the novel, even when she is making visits in small settings. When she calls on Netherfield to sit with Jane and inquire about her “illness,” Mrs. Bennet makes herself look foolish through her stretches of the truth as well as speaking rudely of others. Even though Jane pleads to go home and remove herself from being a burden to the Bingley family, Mrs. Bennet insists that Jane is “a

great deal too ill to be moved” (41). In addition to exaggerating to keep her daughter near the wealthy bachelor, Mrs. Bennet also shows her ill manners in her conversation with the Bingley family. After inquiring whether Charlotte Lucas, a family friend that is especially close to Elizabeth, had dined at Netherfield, she stresses multiple times how it is such a pity that she is not more attractive (44). In an effort to make her daughters—and herself—look better, Mrs. Bennet explains that even though the Lucases have always forced their daughters to participate in house work, she has always been able to keep servants to do chores. She goes on to express how much more beautiful her own daughters are, and continues to stress how Jane stands above them all; before she can continue to talk and embarrass the family, Elizabeth quickly interjects to change the subject (44).

Mrs. Bennet also shows her lack of manners at public balls throughout the novel. While attending the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth finds her mother proclaiming to a crowd how her daughter Jane is soon to be married. Mrs. Bennet continues to embarrass the family through loud, rude comments about Mr. Darcy, and even though Elizabeth attempts to quiet her, Mrs. Bennet continues (97). In a letter to Elizabeth explaining his character after she rejects his first proposal, Mr. Darcy addresses the lack of dignity portrayed frequently by Elizabeth’s mother (193). The family’s lack of manners convinces Mr. Darcy to persuade Mr. Bingley to flee the idea of marrying Jane, further proving the effects of Mrs. Bennet’s lack of civility. While she does lack manners, Mrs. Bennet means well in most cases; she only wants comfort and security for her daughters, as well as for herself.

Examples of Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

For Austen, Mrs. Bennet is the primary example of Regency attitudes; she is the mouthpiece of society, constantly stressing the need for security in marriage. While she appears to be ill-mannered and outrageously desperate in her attempts to marry off her daughters, her actions are grounded in the eighteenth and nineteenth century ideals of marriage. Girls did not have many options in life, and the characters of Austen's novel reflect the lifestyle of women in those restrictive situations. In spite of the pressure to marry, Austen wants her audience to see that settling in a "comfortable" or "convenient" marriage is not ideal. Most of the women in the novel are forced into thinking that marriage is their only option, and many characters—such as Charlotte and Lydia—find themselves settling into marriages that do not hold the affection Austen stresses is essential to a happy marriage.

Bad marriages. One of the worst examples of a marriage found within the novel rests within the foundational relationship of the Bennet family. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet married based on convenience and youthful attraction. The first few pages of the novel clearly illustrate the fact that the two did come together based on love. Yet, despite the affection they felt as newlyweds, the two ultimately are very different in personality, with Mr. Bennet being sarcastic and reserved, with Mrs. Bennet's possessing an "uncertain temper" and "mean understanding" (Austen 7). Austen says that even though the pair had been married twenty-three years, they had yet to begin to understand each other (7). Mr. Bennet seems to enjoy mocking his wife, and Mrs. Bennet bases her happiness with her husband entirely on whether he is fulfilling her wishes or not. Their marriage's disconnect is evident not only in the ways they treat each other, but also in the differing opinions they possess. The divide is evident in the events of Mr. Collins' proposal to

Elizabeth. Despite Mrs. Bennet's selfish insistence on Elizabeth's agreement, Mr. Bennet tells Elizabeth that if she settles on a marriage to Mr. Collins, he "will never see [her] again" (110). Mrs. Bennet continues to plead with Elizabeth and attempt to change her mind. Mrs. Bennet bases her reasoning for her extreme actions on the idea of wanting to have ways to provide for her daughters even after Mr. Bennet's death. Even when Mr. Bennet jokingly suggests that they focus more on his survival rather than what will happen after he is dead, Mrs. Bennet still focuses her entire attention on the idea of marrying her daughters (128). Mr. and Mrs. Bennet represent a typical marriage of the nineteenth century. While they were originally married based on society expectations, the couple continues to live miserably because they are both unable to understand the personality of the other.

The unsuccessful foundational marriage of the Bennet family has a major effect on the lives of the Bennet daughters. Of all the Bennet sisters, Lydia Bennet is the most carefree and wild one. At only sixteen years of age, Lydia is known to be the biggest flirt of the Bennet sisters. While she is the youngest, she is the most outspoken. Her sister, Kitty, who is two years her elder, constantly follows Lydia's daring lead. As an outsider, Darcy even accuses Lydia of living her entire life as a joke (34). Joe Weinsheimer's article discusses that Lydia's flirtation is "fixed on [the] scarlet [coats]" of the regiment (412). When a dear friend invites her to come to Brighton with her and follow the regiment as they journey forward, Lydia is elated. Even though Elizabeth begs her father to not allow Lydia to go, he claims that the exposure is necessary (Austen 222). In defeat, Elizabeth stresses that "[h]er character will be fixed, and she will...be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous" (223). Elizabeth makes

it clear that the only real attraction that Lydia has is her youth and the fact that she is tolerable, and predicts that she will be the downfall in causing the Bennet sisters to forever be a disgrace (223). While at the time Elizabeth's prediction may have seemed extreme to Mr. Bennet, it unfortunately almost came to being. Not long after Lydia goes to Brighton, urgent news reaches the Bennet family that she and Wickham ran away together. During the Regency, such an action caused a young woman and her family to be forever disgraced. The Bennet family is convinced that because of her lack of connections and money, nothing will tempt Wickham to actually marry her and save her from public shame (224). After multiple agonizing days of searching, the couple is finally discovered, and a sum of money—that appears to be from Mrs. Bennet's generous brother, but is secretly from Mr. Darcy—convinces Wickham to wed Lydia (286). The relief is overwhelming in the Bennet house, but Austen wants to say more through the story of Lydia and Wickham's marriage.

While the marriage appears to be blissful, and the flirtatious Lydia seems happy and giddy with the match, Austen makes it clear that this marriage does not have the ideal level of love that should exist between a husband and a wife. The main reason that Wickham even agrees to marry Lydia is because of the money Mr. Darcy offers him. While at first he claims to reject the idea of marrying her out of charity, he suddenly decides to marry her once money is offered, an amount that Mr. Bennet claims could not be less than ten-thousand pounds (288). In addition to simply marrying for money, Lydia's behavior during her visit home after the wedding makes it clear that she was lost in fantasy. All she is able to talk about is her marriage and how she wants to show off her

rings; despite the agony and pain she has caused within the Bennet household during the past few weeks, Lydia insists on parading herself around during her entire visit (299). Her lack of maturity only proves that her love with Wickham is simply based on sensual factors. Lydia does go against the typical marriage structure of society, as her rebellion is based on sexual passion, proved by her willingness to openly live with Wickham before they are married. Author Tania Orum points out the fact that Elizabeth believes Lydia is so flirtatious and eager to attach herself to anyone (27). Her feelings are superficial, and the marriage she shares with Wickham will lose its sparkle once she is forced to face the reality of being married to a man like him.

In addition to the unsatisfying marriage of Lydia and Wickham, Austen also uses the character of Charlotte to offer insight on the marriage structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As mentioned before, Charlotte Lucas is a dear friend of Elizabeth. She is known as being very plain, and at the age of twenty-seven, the prospects of marriage are lessening each day. Charlotte's family is not as well off as the Bennet family. In fact, the point is "emphasized several times in the novel, as a strain on the social status of the family, that the daughters [had] to participate in household work," unlike the Bennet sisters (Orum 10). As a woman with little money and connections, it is not surprising that Charlotte is eager to marry. In the early pages of the book, she tells Elizabeth that she believes "[h]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (Austen 24). In her mind, people should marry knowing very little about a person, and base the entire decision on convenience and security. In *Jane Austen: An Annotated Edition*, Editor Patricia Meyer Specks points out that Charlotte acknowledged the fact that she lacked money and looks; in her mind, marriage was the best and only solution for

a woman in her situation (12). This idea of marriage is “pragmatic,” “unromantic,” and “cynical” (12), but for Charlotte, it is her reality. Unlike Lydia’s romantic ideals, Charlotte approaches marriage with this understanding (Weinsheimer 409), and rather than being ignorant, she is fully aware of how her true happiness is simply a matter of chance.

When Mr. Collins does propose to Charlotte, the fact she says yes comes as little surprise to the reader. Charlotte clearly does not believe in the romantic idea of marriage that Elizabeth upheld, and in her mind, marriage was to be her “pleasantest preservation from want” (Austen 120). In the minds of Charlotte’s family, the match is welcomed because it provided security for Charlotte while also freeing her from the looming title of “old maid” (Ross 131). Elizabeth is baffled by Charlotte’s decision, knowing from her own experience that Mr. Collins is not “sensible or agreeable” (Lambdin and Lambdin 37). In her own defense, Charlotte informs Elizabeth that she only “asks for a comfortable home,” where her “chance of happiness . . . is fair” (Austen 123). She goes on to spend her life in a simple, passionless marriage where both parties are simply happy to find each other because they had both been searching for “any mate available” (Weinsheimer 409). Elizabeth expresses her disappointment in her friend without restraint, and Charlotte’s decision to sacrifice her happiness for complacency and worldly comforts creates a distance between the friends. Charlotte exemplifies the typical Regency marriage. Upon reflecting on her marriage, Charlotte claims that it is in general satisfactory (Austen 120), providing a clear indication of the lack of true love in her marriage to Mr. Collins. Through the pairing, the author is able to comment on the lack

of romance and passion found in the economically based marriages like that of Mr. and Mrs. Collins.

Good marriages. Throughout the novel, Austen uses her central characters in order to show the benefits of marrying for true love. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner provide an important example of a successful marriage, despite the seemingly minor part their relationship plays in the novel. When Austen first introduces her uncle Mr. Gardiner, he is said to be “greatly superior to his sister [Mrs. Bennet in nature and education]” (Austen 137). His manners are described as “easy and pleasant,” (237), making him an enjoyable person with which to engage. Mrs. Gardiner is portrayed elegantly as well as compassionately toward her nieces (139). She proves her sensibility in the advice she gives to Lizzy concerning Mr. Wickham, warning her to “not let [her] fancy run away with [her]” (142). She acknowledges that she thinks Elizabeth has a good head on her shoulders, but she also notices the extent to which Elizabeth appears to be infatuated with the seemingly untrustworthy soldier. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner fit very well together. Unlike in the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Gardiner never rudely undermines her husband’s authority. They have rational conversations, and value each other’s opinion in different situations. When they are discussing their meeting with Mr. Darcy, the couple easily comes to an agreement in determining that he was not the prideful, arrogant character that people described him to be (246). They are also both generous toward their family, and as soon as they hear of the scandal with Lydia, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are eager to assist in any way that they can (267). Mrs. Gardiner attempts to comfort her nieces during the time of distress, and Mr. Gardiner quickly travels to London in order to aid Mr. Bennet, and eventually takes over the pursuit of the runaway couple (283). The

Gardiners prove to be a successful couple, working well together and growing in their love for each other.

Another successful marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is the match of Jane and Mr. Bingley. James Sherry's article claims that Jane and Mr. Bingley are obviously meant for each other (614). During their first ball together, Mr. Bingley describes her as "the most beautiful creature [he has] ever beheld" (Austen 13). Jane is also enchanted, stating what an honor it was to have him ask her to dance a second time (16). The couple moves forward without either boldly claiming to have feelings, and while Mr. Bingley's sisters favored Jane, they did not approve of the Bennet family. Through their relationship, Jane and Bingley face multiple obstacles including "her reserve, her parents, and Darcy's interference" (Weinsheimer 408). Eventually, because of these oppositions, Mr. Bingley and his party leave Netherfield and return to London, removing themselves from the Bennet family (Orum 13). In the face of everyone else's disappointment and condemnation of Mr. Darcy as the culprit, Jane attempts to remain positive and not think poorly of the situation (Austen 134). The minute he finally returns for the first time, the chemistry between Jane and Bingley remains present, so much so that Elizabeth encourages Jane to "take care" (320). After multiple visits and calls on the Bennet household, Mr. Bingley finally proposes to Jane, who responds with the most joyous acceptance possible (327). The love shared between Bingley and Jane surpasses the economic necessities or surface-level sensual love—the two bring each other immense happiness, and prove themselves to be a perfect match in building a marriage based on love.

The Ideal Marriage

Aside from Jane and Mr. Bingley, Austen provides an even stronger example of a marriage grounded in true love through Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. The pair finds true happiness in overcoming each other's faults of pride and prejudice in a love that is even more passionate and sincere than that of Jane and Bingley's. Not only are they able to find love, but they are able to work through change within their own perspectives in order to find a truly happy marriage. In the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth sees Mr. Darcy as an arrogant and prideful man. Their relationship begins at the Netherfield ball, where he claims that she "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt [*him*]" (Austen 13). From this point on, throughout the majority of the novel, the two seem to hold a tense dislike of each other. Despite meeting on multiple occasions, their faults of pride and prejudice continue to keep them apart.

Elizabeth Bennet is a character like no other heroine before her. She is not afraid to speak her mind. As discussed in Waldron's book, Austen created Elizabeth as a character that represents someone battling worldly ideas, emerging victorious in the midst of many trials and obstacles (84). Rather than suffer consequences, Elizabeth claims victory and wins over the society ideals. Austen expert Sylvia H. Myers claims that Elizabeth struggles to rebuild her integrity even with the unsuccessful marriage of her parents (228). Elizabeth did not want to be fooled into a marriage based on youthful looks and lusts; she refused to marry for practical or sensual means, and seemed fearless despite the pressures from her family and lack of suitors in society (Myers 228). She is closest with her older sister Jane, and the two of them share everything with each other. Mr. Bennet makes it clear in the first few pages of the novel that Elizabeth is his favorite, stating that when he goes to see Mr. Bingley, he "must throw in a good word for [*his*]

little Lizzy” (Austen 6). In comparison to her sisters, Elizabeth is similar in that she shares their headstrong opinions and love of laughter. She is different in that she, as well as Jane, appears to be one of the more logical members of the family. Elizabeth has a level head on her shoulders, which leads toward her unique beliefs regarding love and marriage. She believes that in a happy marriage, the goal is not simply to be “well married” to “a rich husband” (23); in her mind, love and happiness is essential to a successful marriage. Elizabeth is willing to wait until she finds that love and happiness with a man before she ever agrees to marriage.

In addition to having views that conflict with society, Elizabeth also acts in such a way that would have been unimaginable to most women during the Regency era. Elizabeth first refuses the esteemed (though ridiculous) Mr. Collins who could have provided her and her family with financial security. When Mr. Collins proposes to her, he assumes that she will immediately say yes. Everything about the match fits perfectly in the culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As heir to the Bennet estate, it is only natural that he marry one of the Bennet daughters. In his proposal, Mr. Collins even says that he knows she will accept because he is worthy of her, and can offer her a comfortable home with the coveted security that every woman of the era desired (106). Even when Elizabeth denies him multiple times, he is convinced that her parents will change her mind and his proposal “will not fail of being acceptable” (106). Mrs. Bennet does follow through in fulfilling Mr. Collins’ assumption, informing him that Elizabeth does not know what is in her best interest, and that she “will *make* her know it” (108). In contrast, Mr. Bennet does not insist that Elizabeth marry Mr. Collins. As a man in an unfulfilled marriage, he knows the consequences of not marrying for the right reasons,

and tells Elizabeth that if she marries Mr. Collins she will have to be a stranger to him (109). This proposal is a clear example of the typical structures of the society, but Elizabeth stands out against the crowd in declining the offer and choosing to move forward as a single woman.

In addition to refusing Mr. Collins, Elizabeth also initially refuses Mr. Darcy. Knowing his connections and the wonderful financial security he could provide for her and her family, she still refuses his offer of marriage at first. If Mr. Darcy assumed she would accept, he does not state it explicitly, but the fact that he chose to propose against his better judgment suggests that he thought she would agree to marry a man as esteemed as he was (185). Even though he would be a valuable husband, Elizabeth denies him on the basis of her dislike of his character. She informs him that she has “every reason in the world to think ill” of him because he ruined the happiness of her beloved sister (186). Alistair Duckworth’s essay argues that Mr. Darcy had been blind to the love between Jane and Bingley (314). He convinced his friend to retreat, and as a result, Elizabeth condemned him for it. She also accuses him of the fact he was “unjust to Wickham” (314), and claims that his character makes him “the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed on to marry” (Austen 188). In this initial proposal, Darcy stands in as the typical social hierarchy of the time, believing that as her superior, Elizabeth would look past their disagreements in order to marry him; in contrast, she stands up for love and personal values (Orum 23). Elizabeth makes it clear that her refusal is based on disliking his character, and the fact she believes he will not make her happy. Rather than depend on the idea of learning to like him in marriage, Elizabeth will not subject herself to an unfulfilling marriage.

Despite her dislike of his character, over time, Elizabeth learns new truths about Mr. Darcy that begin to change her perspective of him. In the letter that he writes to her after she denies his proposal, he explains himself on the accusations of separating Jane and Bingley, as well as his dealings with Mr. Wickham. In the letter, he informs her that his foundational reason for discouraging Bingley to pursue Jane was because he did not think she was seriously in love as well as the fact that she was surrounded a family lacking not only in finances, but also society-based manners (24). He also informs her that he never mistreated Wickham, but that his current position is the result of his own evil actions and attempt to elope with Darcy's sister for financial gain (25). Later, when Elizabeth learns of Darcy's generosity toward Lydia, she is even more convinced that his character exceeds the incorrect assumptions about him (Austen 302). In the end, she thanks him for his overwhelming kindness, and admits that she was wrong in thinking ill of him. Through learning more about Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth comes to better understand his character, and as a result, she realizes that her assumptions based on pride were not correct.

The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy promises to be a success not only because they go through the process of learning to better understand each other, but also because they complement each other's personalities. Through getting to know each other, each of them has his or her own faults that he or she has to overcome in order to appreciate the other's "temperaments and beliefs" (Moler 491). Through learning to understand Elizabeth's character, Darcy "gains in naturalness and learns to respect the innate dignity of the individual" (491). He proves his new understanding through encouraging Mr. Bingley to return to the Bennet estate and offer marriage to his beloved Jane. When he

meets Elizabeth again, he acknowledges that his behavior was “unpardonable,” and that he had been unable to see the love between Jane and Bingley before that time (348). Elizabeth learns to overcome her pride by accepting that she was wrong about Mr. Darcy, acknowledging that she “abused [him] abominably” in telling him her cruel and unfounded opinions of him (Austen 347). When her father later condemns his character, confused as to why Elizabeth would consider marrying him, she informs her father of the generosity Mr. Darcy showed in saving Lydia (356). She tells him that she was entirely wrong, and that he is “perfectly amiable” (356). As claimed in Walter E. Anderson’s, “Plot, Character, Speech, and Place in *Pride and Prejudice*,” the two move toward “a more perfect knowledge of each other” as the novel begins to close (369). Despite their initial feelings, the pair learns to forgive and overcome those obstacles in order to develop a deep relationship founded in love.

Conclusion

In the end, Elizabeth is sure to have the most fulfilling relationship based on acceptance and sincere adoration for Mr. Darcy. Through her novel, Austen stresses that a woman’s reason to marry should not be based on security, extreme passion, or money. While Charlotte and Lydia both end up in a comfortable marriage, neither has a relationship that can compare to that of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. Charlotte admits that she is not in love with Mr. Collins, and Lydia is so blinded by her sexual passions that she is not able to see the poor qualities of Mr. Wickham’s character. Jane and Mr. Bingley’s companionship is the only relationship that can begin to measure up to Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s marriage, but even Jane and Mr. Bingley have not truly gotten to know each other in the way that Mr. and Mrs. Darcy have. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy represent

Austen's true beliefs on marriage in the Regency era. In her mind, a woman should marry based on her own personal convictions of love for the other person, and perhaps, like Elizabeth, learn to accept his faults and set aside her own in order to find true happiness that allows security, passion, and wealth for years to come.

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