Marriage and Women in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2015

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:954647

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-03-29**

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Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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Marriage and Women in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr.sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2015.

Abstract

Pride and Prejudice is a novel written in the early nineteenth century (1813). It depicts the English society of gentry (landowners) and their habits and attitudes towards life. The very opening of the novel points to marriage as its major theme. As women were subordinated to men in the nineteenth century, they could only use marriage as their means of social validation. Because the class division is based on money, the more money one has, the higher their rank. Since women were not rightful owners of any type of material property, the only way to acquire a respectable status in the society was entering a marriage with a man of high social rank. Thus, women were often forced to marry not the man they loved but rather a man whom they found to be more "agreeable" in all other aspects. This paper relies on the examples from the novel to show how nineteenth-century women imagined their marriage and the marriage of their daughters, and what kind of a man was considered a good match. In this view, Jane Austen successfully portrays the society of the then England and contemporary anxieties connected with marriage.

Keywords: women, marriage, nineteenth century, class, society, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen.

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Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel published in 1813, but it does not display typical Romantic characteristics. Rather, it may be said that its style and characteristics foreshadow the upcoming Victorian era. As Victorian novels often do, it portrays and comments on the social conventions of the period. It is generally known that the society of the nineteenth century England was nothing like today: class differences were more visible, polite manners were much more appreciated and, most importantly, the social status of women was determined according to the status of their family or their husband. Therefore they had to marry the most appropriate man that was sometimes even imposed on them by their family. Though they could choose whom they would marry, there was very little possibility that they would marry a man they loved, unless he is also wealthy and willing to marry her.

This paper will rely on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate the thesis that because of their subordinated position marriage was the only way through which women could validate their social status. Therefore, it was usually not an institution created for love but rather one based on social class. The first chapter will focus on the society of the early nineteenth century as it is described in the novel, whereas the second and the third will focus on the role of women and their means of acquiring a respectable social status.

1. Class and Society in the Early Nineteenth Century and in the Novel

Pride and Prejudice is often taken to be a Victorian novel because it is very realistic in its depiction of the early nineteenth century English society. At the time, England was still a land of aristocracy, even though the Industrial Revolution caused major changes in the class structure. In "Class and Money" Julia Prewitt Brown explains this class division by saying that there were three major classes – upper, middle and lower – that were further divided (72). The one that is important for this thesis is the upper class. Prewitt Brown further explains that the upper class "can be divided into three sections: the aristocracy, the gentry, and the squirarchy or class of independent gentlemen who did not have to work" (73). She argues further:

> The aristocracy were the great landed proprietors whose estates exceeded 10,000 acres (about 18 square miles) and who, for the most part, belonged to the peerage.(...) Beneath them, the gentry was made up of the smaller landed proprietors whose estates ran from 1,000 to 10,000 acres and whose annual income ranged from£1,000 to £10,000 a year (...). These two sections of the upper class together (...) owned more than two-thirds of all the land in England. Moving a step lower, the much larger group of borderline gentry and independent gentlemen had less land and income; these gentlemen and their families lived on about £700 to £1,000 a year. (73)

To compare with, these sums would today be counted in millions for aristocracy, hundreds of thousands to millions for gentry and hundreds of thousands for independent gentlemen (Prewitt Brown 74).

The majority of Austen's characters are members of the upper class. At the opening of the novel she tells us that Fitzwilliam Darcy, one of the main characters, has an income of £10,000 a year. In spite of his enormous yearly income and his origins, he is technically not a member of aristocracy due to the absence of the title that a real aristocrat was supposed to have (Prewitt Brown 74):

> To qualify as an aristocrat, one had to be of titled rank, to own an estate exceeding 10,000 acres, to have enough money in revenues to live opulently, and to own a house in London to go to during the social season. Obviously there were exceptions—some ancient titles had declining fortunes—but in order to participate fully in the social life of the aristocracy, one had to have these things. (Prewitt Brown 74)

The Bennets, as well as most of the people who live in Meryton and its surroundings, are members of the gentry. Their income does not come near £10,000 a year but rather around £2,000 to £5,000. Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, can be regarded as a gentleman. The following passage explains why: "In Jane Austen's novels, a gentleman can be a younger son of the gentry who has not inherited an estate and who has taken holy orders (...), or he can be the son of a man who has made a fortune in business and has been brought up as a gentleman to do nothing (Mr. Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*)" (Prewitt Brown 76). When he comes to the neighbourhood, Bingley is instantly seen as a desirable potential husband of one of the Bennet daughters because of his wealth.

As Prewitt Brown points out, class and money are essential in *Pride and Prejudice*: "[c]lass and money are givens in [this novel]. They are to the novelist as the clay is to the potter, for they are not only the substance with which characters must structure their lives; they *define* character and social life" (70). Furthermore, "[c]lass and money are the media through which [characters] must shape their lives. Jane Austen was not interested in people who try to find themselves by going outside of society" (Prewitt Brown 69). The characters in the novel are strictly defined by their social status which cannot drastically change unless a character loses a great sum of money or somehow comes into its possession. To illustrate the general tendency concerning fluctuations of class, Lawrence Stone suggested that "a class is not a finite group of families but rather a bus or hotel, always full but always filled with different people" (23). This makes it more understandable that to the society of the nineteenth century England money really made the world (or class) go around. Prewitt Brown agrees with Stone and suggests that:

> In the early nineteenth century, the nexus of social change was to be found more in the gentry and middle class than either the working class or aristocracy. Austen shows over and over again that the apparent stability of class position is an illusion created by the slowness of change through marriage and the peculiar stability of class character, resulting from the chameleonlike adaptability of new families. (78)

Throughout history money has always meant the same thing: power. In the nineteenth century it usually opened a way to the upper class; however, "[t]his [did] not mean that everyone who [was] rich [was] a member of the upper class. But without money, people sink awfully fast" (Brown 71). Austen's novel reflects this through Mr. Bennet's frequent warnings to his wife and two frivolous younger daughters – Lydia and Kitty that they should

reduce their expenditures, for they "were in the habit of spending more than they ought" (Austen 10).

Even smaller amounts of money meant some kind of stability at the time – they meant preserving one's social status. In that regard, Mr. Bennet had enough money to not be forced to work, but if his family spent more than they could yearly afford, this money would soon be gone and their social rank would be lowered. This kind of scenario troubled them so much that they hardly dared to speak of it in open terms; however, Mr. Bennet was aware of the fact that "Mrs. Bennet had no turn for economy, and [his] love of independence had alone prevented their exceeding their income" (Austen 177).

In addition to the obvious economic reasons and fear of poverty, one of the reasons for anxiety regarding the loss of current social status is the fact that the upper class, which everyone looks up to as a role model, is usually narrow-minded and very proud of their status. In fact, they are so proud that they often regard anyone who is of lower rank as unworthy of their company. Consequently, they are not infrequently snobbish and prone to judgement, as one can see on numerous examples in Austen's novel. One of them is the unjustified disinclination towards Darcy when he first comes to the neighbourhood with Bingley. He is immediately pronounced to be disagreeable because of his behaviour. Nobody even gives him a chance to prove them wrong: "His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again. Amongst the most violent against him was Mrs. Bennet, whose dislike of his general behaviour was sharpened into particular resentment by his having slighted one of her daughters" (Austen 7). Thus, Mrs. Bennet's proud attitude towards him does not change until Elizabeth announces their marriage: "I am quite sorry, Lizzy, that you should be forced to have that disagreeable man all to yourself. But I hope you will not mind it: it is all for Jane's sake, you know; and there is no occasion for talking to him, except just now and then. So, do not put yourself to inconvenience" (Austen 218).

Pride and Prejudice is frequently called a novel of manners because of the concerns about the society of that time: "As we have seen, Jane Austen's characters are concerned with dignity, breeding, and gentility—all the components of what we call manner" (Karl 158). The fact that Austen places her characters in the realistic circumstances helps one learn more about the actual expectations of the society of her time. Her characters are expected to act in accordance with their social class and "her irony is directed at those who wander ever so little

from the expectations of society" (Karl 158). Those who break the unwritten rules are usually confronted with difficulties and certain amount of disdain; this is especially typical of female characters as suggested through the character of Lydia Bennet, who runs away with Wickham. More importantly, rather than simply ruining her own reputation due to her reckless behaviour, Lydia jeopardizes the reputation of the entire family and ruins the other sisters' chances of getting married:

> [Elizabeth's] power was sinking; everything *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace. She could neither wonder nor condemn, but the belief of [Darcy's] self-conquest brought nothing consolatory to her bosom, afforded no palliation of her distress. It was, on the contrary, exactly calculated to make her understand her own wishes; and never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain. (Austen 159)

The major flaws of the upper class society are, as the novel's title suggests, pride and prejudice, but also vanity. The rich are too proud of their own money and heritage which causes them to be vain and dismissive of those who are less well off. They never consider a person's individual virtues, but think of him or her only as a member of his or her family and class. In other words, the prejudice of the rich against those who are not as rich often cause distress to both sides as emotions and individual qualities are disregarded. Mary's comments on the difference between vanity and pride illustrate the deficiency of obsessive self-absorption: "Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us" (Austen 13). Darcy also comments on this topic by saying: "Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation" (Austen 36). Clearly, these two characteristics are two completely opposite things. While pride can have negative as well as positive outcomes, depending upon the person's character, vanity can only have negative outcomes. Having read the novel, one can conclude that half of the society is vain, starting from Mr. Bingley's sisters, who are considered to be of higher rank, to Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters, who are the members of gentry. In the course of the novel Darcy states: "I have an excessive regard for Miss Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it" (Austen 23). Austen's criticism of such attitude is seen in the redeeming ending of the novel as Darcy realises that no woman

could make him happier or be a better and more interesting partner than Elizabeth, despite her poor connections. Though proud, he is not as vain as one might think, which at last prevails in his open admiration towards Elizabeth and his final decision. In addition to criticizing pride, prejudice and vanity, and praising the personal growth of her characters who are able to overcome these flaws, by suggesting that it is Darcy's evolution that enables the two of them to marry, Austen nevertheless clearly marks the nineteenth century society as patriarchal. Namely, as a woman, Elizabeth depends on Darcy's change of mind, rather than vice versa.

To sum up, it is easily concluded that money indeed was most important. It divided people into classes and therefore played the biggest role at the time, especially for women who were seen as inferior and were judged according to the families they were born and married into. It often caused pride and vanity, which resulted in creating prejudices and people looking down not only on those of a different rank, but also on those of the same rank. Still, Austen suggests through Darcy's and Elizabeth's personal growth and maturation that it is much better to rely on one's sensibility and overcome one's pride in order to be truly happy.

2. The Role of Women in the Nineteenth Century and Their Portrayal in the Novel

While women today are (almost) as equal as men, women in the nineteenth century did not have the same opportunity. They had few rights, which contributed to the rise of the women's rights and the suffrage movement thanks to which changes occurred in the course of the nineteenth century when they gained some rights with regard to marriage (Simkin) and voting (Wojtczak).

To understand their position better, it is necessary to point out that women, once married, did not have any possessions (Damrosch). Everything they owned became their husband's possession. This was due to "the laws in Britain [that] were based on the idea that women would get married and that their husbands would take care of them" (Simkin). Simkin explains this in more detail: "Before the passing of the 1887 Married Woman's Property Act, when a woman got married she could not own property, even inherited property, and her wealth was automatically passed to her husband. If a woman worked after marriage, her earnings also belonged to her husband".

If one takes a closer look at the position of women, it is obvious that they were subordinated to men. The only role they were obliged to play was that of a wife and a mother, especially when it comes to women of the upper class. Since they did not have to work, their only duty was to give birth to their children and to obey their husband. Consequently, it does not surprise that the only things we know of them are usually "their names[,] the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore" (Woolf 580). However, women of the nineteenth century were to some extent in a better position than those before them: "[They] had some leisure; they had some education. It was no longer the exception for women of the middle and upper classes to choose their own husbands. And it is significant that of the four great women novelists – Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot – not one had a child, and two were unmarried" (Woolf 581). As stated, women in the nineteenth century had some education, though not in today's form. They were educated from books that were at first read to them by their mothers until they were taught to read or, if they could afford it, by a governess who could teach them things like reading, writing or playing certain instruments. Austen alludes to this many times in *Pride and Prejudice*. The members of the higher rank, like Darcy's sister and Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, had the privilege of having a governess who could teach them these things. On the other hand, the Bennets did not have

enough money to afford their five daughters a governess, so they were mostly self-educated at home. Of all of them, Mary was most persistent in it and was trying to learn as much as possible, although not always successfully. Lydia and Kitty did not care much about these things, and Jane and Elizabeth paid enough attention to it to be regarded as educated. Luckily, they had enough money to be able to afford books from which they could learn. When Lady Catherine asks Elizabeth about her education, she says: "We never had a governess" (Austen 98) but their parents still made it possible for them to get an education: "such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might" (Austen 98).

According to Armstrong, women are the weaker sex by laws of nature, so what eventually determined their social role are probably their physical and psychological differences ("Introduction" 623). They are responsible for "ma[king] men political and women domestic rather than the other way around, and both therefore acquired identity on the basis of personal qualities that had formerly determined female nature alone" (Armstrong, "Introduction" 623). Due to their sensibility and sensitivity women were perceived as better in housework than men. Nevertheless, Armstrong refers to another important difference:

> [in] nineteenth century fiction, (...), men were no longer political creatures so much as they were products of desire and producers of domestic life. As gender came to mark the most important difference among individuals, men were still men and women still women, of course, but the difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of mind. ("Introduction" 622-623)

As well as in fiction, in the nineteenth century real life women were much more respected if they were more sensible than others. If one takes *Pride and Prejudice* as an example of a realistic depiction of the society of that time, it is clear that those women who acted in accordance with their sense were more appreciated in the society. For example, because of her common sense Elizabeth did not let herself be fooled by some characters and she acted the way she thought was best. With such traits as the brightness of her mind and sensibility, she is much esteemed by others. Therefore, people like spending time in her company and do not hide their admiration for her: "It was plain to them all that Colonel Fitzwilliam came because he had pleasure in their society, a persuasion which of course recommended him still more; and Elizabeth was reminded by her own satisfaction in being with him, as well as by his evident admiration of her" (Austen 107).

During the course of the nineteenth century women were becoming more and more recognized as writers. This was a huge step forward, even if many of them had to publish under pseudonyms, because earlier in history they were not allowed to publish any kind of literary forms. According to Ian Watt, women were better in writing novels. He attributes it to the "the feminine sensibility [that] was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel" (298). This can be explained on account of their better connectedness to the society in the sense that they spent more time observing it than men. Men had "better" work to do. Woolf explains that it was the female way of living and that by "[being] surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet" (Woolf 581). Gilbert and Gubar ascribe the women's power in portraying their characters to the struggle they had with overcoming the female stereotypes (48). They had to prove to the society "that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). It is difficult to establish what exactly helped women write the way they did about the society. Nevertheless, they played a huge role in changing the perspective of the society when it comes to their position by writing novels and depicting male and female characters and their problems.

If one tries to analyse the role of women in the novel, it can be seen that it is compatible with the ones previously described. Most of the female characters in the novel suit their role of a mother and a wife. However, they had one more important role: they were in charge of the house and property. They were responsible for the furniture and housekeeping, except when they had servants. Although they did not have their own possessions once they got married, they were mistresses of the household and, besides being a mother and a wife; it was their most important role.

Their depiction in the novel is based on daily leisure and social events that took place in their neighbourhood. The most important social events were balls, and Austen describes two significant ones: the first in the town near Meryton, and the second in Netherfield, on Mr. Bingley's property. Balls were very important in making social connections because they were massive assemblies and various people attended them. At the first ball were made the most important acquaintances that would affect the course of the novel: Jane met Bingley and Darcy met Elizabeth. The second ball was more a formality that took place in order to confirm the opinions established on their first meeting. In addition to being an opportunity for making

connections, balls also provided an opportunity to meet a future husband. Therefore, it is no wonder that women in the novel desperately wanted to attend them and look their best:

> The prospect of the Netherfield ball was extremely agreeable to every female of the family. Mrs. Bennet chose to consider it as given in compliment to her eldest daughter, and was particularly flattered by receiving the invitation from Mr. Bingley himself, instead of a ceremonious card. Jane pictured to herself a happy evening in the society of her two friends, and the attentions of her brother; and Elizabeth thought with pleasure of dancing a great deal with Mr. Wickham. (...) And even Mary could assure her family that she had no disinclination for it. (Austen 54)

Another thing that characterizes women in the novel is their constant visits to friends and family. Elizabeth and Miss Lucas, owing to the fact that they are close friends and live nearby, often visit each other. Lydia and Kitty, on the other hand, undertake their visits based on the fact that near Meryton, a town where their aunt and uncle are situated, there is a militia regiment station. Therefore, they pay frequent visits to them not with the intentions of firming their relationship with the family, but with the immature intentions of having fun with the soldiers:

> The two youngest of the family, Catherine and Lydia, were particularly frequent in these attentions; their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt. At present, indeed, they were well supplied both with news and happiness by the recent arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood; it was to remain the whole winter, and Meryton was the headquarters. (Austen18)

Elizabeth and Jane, however, were different from Lydia and Kitty. They liked spending time with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, their uncle and aunt, as well as travelling, which was a great advantage for women of upper classes considering the fact that travelling is the best way to learn something and to grow as a person, but also to meet people.

It is obvious that women in the nineteenth century still had fewer rights than men and were therefore subordinated to them. However, gender conventions still remain somewhat of a mystery: “While others have isolated rhetorical strategies that naturalize the subordination

of female to male, no one has thoroughly examined the figure, or turn of cultural logic, that both differentiates the sexes and links them together by the magic of sexual desire" (Armstrong, "Introduction" 638). According to Armstrong, to understand these settings of the human society, one has to discard the presumption "that gender differentiation is the root of human identity" ("Introduction" 638) because without doing so it is impossible to comprehend "the totalizing power of this figure or the very real interests such power inevitably serves" ("Introduction" 638).

3. Marriage as a Means of Social Affirmation

Finding a husband was the greatest task of women of the upper and middle class in the nineteenth century according to Victorian fiction (Armstrong, "Gender and the Victorian novel" 113). At that time they could, to a certain extent, choose whom they would marry, which was a major progress compared to the fifteenth century for example. The important thing was for their future husband to be either of the same or of a higher rank than them: "On her choice of a love object, a man she could both marry and desire, depended not only her identity as a white, respectable English woman, but also the integrity of the family unit, on which in turn rested the well-being and longevity of the nation" (Armstrong, "Gender and the Victorian novel" 113). Because women generally did not have many rights, they saw marriage as their means of social validation. They had no personal possessions and could acquire them only in rare cases; while they were unmarried everything was their father's propriety which was to be inherited only by male heirs after his death, and as soon as they got married, the dowry they bring into marriage became their husband's. Therefore, the only way to become socially accomplished was to marry a rich man. Likewise, a rich man cannot be deemed socially accomplished if he remains a bachelor. Austen clearly depicts these concerns in her novel by introducing them with the famous first sentence: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (2). Marriage is thus established as the central concern of the upper classes.

Women were supposed to choose a man who could financially support them and not the one they wanted or loved. This was a common truth and it can safely be said that girls were taught to think that way from early on. It is not uncommon to find female characters openly discussing this in the novel since for most of them this was their sole concern. Mrs. Bennet is a typical example. Everything she wants is for her daughters to marry someone with a great fortune. Austen immediately reveals that: "[t]he business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (Austen 4). After she hears that a young man who has inherited a large sum of money has come into their neighbourhood, she insists on Mr. Bennet's visiting him and immediately sees him as a potential husband for one of her daughters. Similarly, after Elizabeth turns down Mr. Collins' proposal, her mother sees it as the most inappropriate thing since Mr. Collins was to inherit their land after their father passes away. She laments it as if Elizabeth caused their financial downfall the second she refused him:

> Aye, there she comes, (...) looking as unconcerned as may be, and caring no more for us than if we were at York, provided she can have her own way. But I tell you, Miss Lizzy—if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. (...). (Austen 69)

Marriage is in her view a way of survival as well as a way of keeping her status. She even accuses Elizabeth in front of Mr. Collins of "not know[ing] her own interest" (Austen 67) because she finds Mr. Collins to be tolerable enough to make a husband for her daughter. However, Elizabeth does not agree with her – she is not at all interested in him as a man or in his inheritance.

Miss Lucas, on the other hand, willingly accepts his proposal the moment he asks her to marry him. Austen explains that her acceptance happened "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, [and Miss Lucas] cared not how soon that establishment were gained" (74). The narrator further states that "[marriage] was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it" (74-75). Miss Lucas admits these reasons to Elizabeth later, who does not hide her surprise. Charlotte explains she only wants "a comfortable home" (Austen 76) and pictures Mr. Collins a good opportunity for her "considering [his] character, connection, and situation in life" (Austen 76). Having in mind that she is led by the thought of preserving her social status it is difficult to say whether she is to be judged or not because she is not the only one who does it.

Miss Bingley similarly conforms to these social conventions. She attempts with all her feminine powers to attract Darcy in order to have him thinking of her as a potential wife. Since she belongs to the upper class, she is not even thinking of marrying someone poorer than her. According to her, Darcy is a most agreeable man, a perfect match. He is handsome, well-educated, has nice manners, and above all he is very rich. Nevertheless, not everyone has the same opinion of him. Mrs. Bennet, for example, "quite detest[s] [him]" (Austen 9) after she sees his behaviour on the first ball: "But I can assure you (...) that Lizzy does not lose much by not suiting *his* fancy; for he is a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and so conceited that there was no enduring him! He walked here, and he

walked there, fancying himself so very great! Not handsome enough to dance with!" (Austen 9). However, she quickly changes her attitude towards him as soon as she finds out what he did for Lydia and that Elizabeth accepted his proposal:

> Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! (...) how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it—nothing at all. I am so pleased—so happy. Such a charming man!—so handsome! so tall!—Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Every thing that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted. (Austen 220)

His money and the fact that he is willing to marry one of her daughters absolves him from any social misdemeanour he may have committed earlier. Soon after that Mrs. Bennet wants to find out about Mr. Darcy's favourite dish in order to be able to please him. She is very calculating and focused on money, as one can see from the example above.

Though Elizabeth is not led solely by the idea of marrying a wealthy person regardless of his manners, she does exclaim after she sees Darcy's estate "that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" (Austen 141). Even she, who is considered to be quite rational and sensible, admits that it would be nice to live on an estate like Pemberley. Armstrong in this view states that *Pride and Prejudice* is one of those novels that say: "Marry a man with whom you were emotionally compatible if you could, but marry a man of material means you must, (...) or else face the degradation of impoverishment or, worse, the need to work for a living" ("Gender and the Victorian novel" 97). Indeed, the biggest fear of women of the upper class was not marrying a rich person because that would cause their social and economic degradation, which was far worse than being married to a penniless man however much a woman might love him. This is only a reason more to believe that marriage was a means of social as well as financial security.

Men were also susceptible to this idea, as exemplified by Wickham. He tried more than once to marry a rich girl and the first one we find out about is Darcy's sister. Later on he wants to marry Miss King, to whom "he paid (...) not the smallest attention till her grandfather's death made her mistress of this fortune" (Austen 91), and at the end, when he escapes with Lydia, he is willing to marry her only after Darcy discharges his debts and pays him a certain amount of money. But Wickham is not the only one who wants to marry for

money; Colonel Fitzwilliam on one occasion openly discusses with Elizabeth his reasons for marrying a wealthy woman. As Prewitt Brown sums it up, "[b]rought up to lead an aristocratic life and honestly unwilling to give it up, he needs a monied marriage to maintain the expensive leisure to which he is accustomed. He cannot afford the luxury of falling in love with a poor woman" (69). This explains why people at the time want to marry for money; they are used to living in the lap of luxury and are not willing to discharge it. In addition, Armstrong points out "it is fair to say that any man whom women find agreeable in other respects will in all likelihood cost them dearly in economic terms, and there can be little emotional gratification in that" ("Gender and the Victorian novel" 107). Armstrong's conclusion about the Victorian fiction in general could be applied to this novel, too: "Victorian fiction revised an earlier narrative that insisted a woman's quest for financial security and social respectability began and ended with her ability to attract an agreeable man and extract a promise of marriage from him" ("Gender and the Victorian novel" 113). This confirms the earlier presumed thesis that the purpose of marriage in the society of the nineteenth century had to do first and foremost with the woman's social affirmation.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century patriarchal England women generally did not have as many rights as they do today; they had no possessions of their own and since they did not want to waive their social status and the way of living they were used to, the only way to keep it was to marry a man of the same or a higher social status. That way they could preserve the status they acquired at their birth and the reputation they had. Because of these reasons, marriage was a central social concern and was often entered into for economic reasons rather than for love, as shown on numerous examples in *Pride and Prejudice.*

Jane Austen tried to depict the society of that time as faithfully as she could in this novel, and considering the fact that she is a woman, one may say that she understood women's position better than any other male author. Therefore it is no wonder that on multiple occasions through the voice of the novel's narrator she explicitly states that marriage was first and foremost an institution through which women were able to find security and respect. It was enough for them to be able to stand the chosen man in order to give birth to his heirs, and perhaps, someday, to learn to love him. This was their socially constructed vision of happiness.

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