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British Texts from the 1780s  
12 March 2010

The Good, the Bad, and the Very Ugly:  
Marriages in *Pride and Prejudice*

Marriage in the time of Jane Austen was rarely the type of romance portrayed in movies based upon her novels. Especially in the latest adaption of *Pride and Prejudice*, the romances in the novel were usually made to seem more like love stories than what they actually are. Towards the beginning of the novel, Charlotte Lucas makes a statement that seems to set the tone for the rest of the story: "Happiness in marriage is only a matter of chance" (24). Jane Austen, however, does not seem to agree with Charlotte, she takes a very different stance in this novel in her view of marriage. The novel becomes a comment on marriages of the time, highlighting the options a young woman of the era had, from the very good, to the very, very bad. She shows that fighting for the person one wants to be with was the only way for them to achieve total happiness, and if there is not fight, therefore, there is no happiness. The marriages in the novel range from almost perfection in terms of agreement, to a couple that, if divorce had been socially acceptable, would have done so immediately. Austen starts out *Pride and Prejudice* with perhaps one of the most notable lines from a British novel: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (1). This is a story about, in part, marriage, and also sets up the definition of these relationships, the man. Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* seems to reward her characters who fight for their true love with a marriage that is well-matched, rewarding, and full of love, all while punishing those who do not fight with marriages that are loveless, ill-matched, and completely barbaric.

The marriage of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy show one of the few successful, loving relationships in the novel. Their marriage proves that a relationship does not have to be formed

based upon money or stature. Elizabeth lacks both; she is not the typical match for Darcy. He at first does not find her as attractive as he feels his wife should be: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" (13). Darcy shows his pride here, by not allowing Elizabeth to dance with him because he does not find her beautiful, he is establishing himself as above her. Had she been of a rich family, it is possible that he would have danced with her, despite the fact that he was not immediately attracted to her. Both Darcy and Elizabeth are both very proud beings, neither of them ever refuses to back down. However, over the course of the novel both meet in various fashions, and begin forming a mutual attraction to each other. Darcy falls for the intelligence and wit of Elizabeth, while Elizabeth starts to see a softer side of Darcy. It is only after a dinner at which Elizabeth counters Darcy in his beliefs, that he sees her differently:

Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticize. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she hardly had a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. (24)

It is Elizabeth's intelligence that changes Darcy's idea of her, in comparison to the Bingley sisters, she is able to keep competent, witty, and combating conversation with Darcy. This is exactly why they work as a couple, they can converse in a way not other couple in the novel can. She knows how to not back down, and he knows that she can compete, and he finds that to be attractive. They will never become a couple that does not talk, like that of the Bennets. Elizabeth also changes in her attitudes towards Darcy. Once he opens up to her, she still does not see him for the man he is. It is only in the letter he writes, does she realize what he has done for her. Elizabeth is such a family-oriented person, that when she sees how he helped her family, she

releases all of her love for him. Helping her family, proved to Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy did have a good soul, and would be someone she could spend her days with. She finally saw through the external shell he put around himself. She does not believe him to be as proud as she once did. Their mutual attractions turn into a mutual, deep, desperate love. What sets this marriage up as one of, if not the most, successful marriages in the novel, is the mutual intelligence and respect. What also sets this up as a successful marriage is the fact that after Darcy's first proposal, Elizabeth rejects him. She does not feel that they would be marrying for the correct reasons. She made him prove himself, show reasons why she should entire an eternal union with him. However, the successful proposal is not because he has changed too much, but because the way she views him has changed immensely. Elizabeth was mistaken in her estimation of Darcy. She accepts Darcy on her own terms, not trying to settle for anyone. In essence, they both received what they needed out of a relationship. Darcy has someone who will give him conversation, and Elizabeth gets someone she can really see as a decent human being. She marries him because she realizes the type of man he is, and how much she does care for him. This is setting the scene for a long, intense, passionate, loving relationship. They are not using the other for personal gain, like most other couples, but are using each other for conversation and love. While beauty made fade, the conversations they have will keep the marriage While the novel does not tell much of the happiness for the future of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, it is fairly apparent they will be happy together.

While the reader does not see the future of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, one could assume they would end up in a loving, caring relationship like that of the Gardiners. As a couple, the Gardiners are lively, intelligent, and sensible. They think about each other in their daily lives, not just living separate lives together. Mr. Gardiner respects his wife, and includes her in plans.

Rarely do the two make a decision without consulting the other. Elizabeth looks up to Mrs. Gardiner as what she believes a woman needs to be in life and in a marriage. Unlike the other adult relationships in the novel, the Gardiners spend time together. They go to Derbyshire and Pemberley together, allowing both Elizabeth and the reader to see what a good relationship of the time can be. Together, they have a grace and class that even Mr. Darcy accepts. They complement each other beautifully, his urbane manners, and her beauty and charms. While not too much information is given on the marriage of the Gardiners, it is evident that the Bennet girls adore and look up to the Gardiners. Together, they work in a way the girls have not seen before. They listen to each other, they make decisions together, and they actually seem to enjoy each other's company. This is proof that their marriage is working far better than the one the Bennet's have, and is the model for the girls' relationships.

The marriage most like that of the Gardiners is most likely the marriage of Jane and Bingley, their relationship is one built on a quiet love, and mutual respect and adoration. Jane may be the most beautiful of the Bennet daughters, but Bingley is attracted to her not solely because of her looks. Jane is humble, unassuming, and somewhat naïve. She looks for the best in all people, making her quite the opposite of Elizabeth. It appears that in a partner, she wants someone who is responsible, good humored, and someone who is a somewhat of a kindred spirit. Bingley fits those descriptions, having "a pleasant countenance and easy unaffected manner" (12). They are both very happy and optimistic about life and love. They are also both very close with another couple, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. Bingley and Darcy are best friends, and Elizabeth and Jane are close as sisters. After an initial stumble, they are together in what the reader is told is a very happy marriage. All of this is based upon their mutual respect. They, like the Gardiners, work together well in a couple. While they may not have the electric spark that Darcy and

Elizabeth do, they still work well. They may be taken advantage of as time goes on, especially by Lydia, but they are almost always on equal ground in the relationship.

Equal ground in intelligence, interests, and class is important in relationships, in order for them to work properly; this is why the relationship between Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins was really doomed from the beginning, they had none of the three in common. At twenty-seven years old, the chances of Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend, finding a suitable husband were very slim. This is why she settled for Mr. Collins. Mr. Collins is a distant cousin to the Bennets, and is set to take over Longbourne when Mr. Bennet dies, and is a Vicar of a parish. He is taking over Longbourne because Mr. Bennet had only daughters, and therefore no heir to the home. Mr. Collins is an increasingly foolish man who continually talks even while not knowing what he is saying. Charlotte willingly converses with him, even though she also believes him foolish. She knows that he has already proposed to Elizabeth, but says yes so she will not become an old maid. "Without thinking highly of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object" (120), since at her age, with little money, no beauty, and younger brothers and sisters marriage is her best chance of securing a reasonable standard of living: "I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home" (123). She does not even like Mr. Collins, finding "his society...irksome" (398). Also, she is very aware that he does not love her, nor will he ever grow to truly love her. After the marriage, when Elizabeth goes to visit Charlotte, she notes that while Charlotte does not hate Mr. Collins, she pays no mind to him, and often seems like she is ignoring him at all costs. Elizabeth even finds that "once or twice she could discern a faint blush; but in general, Charlotte wisely did not hear" (154) Mr. Collins and his ramblings. She tries to get him out of the house as much as possible, because this seems to make her forget the marriage. All of this is surmised by Elizabeth, never actually said by Charlotte. She never says

anything bad about Mr. Collins, but in the way she acts, Elizabeth can tell. This is a bad marriage in the novel because it is obviously they are both using each other. Mr. Collins does not love Charlotte, but he was someone with whom he can spend his life. Charlotte wanted to be taken care of, and Mr. Collins offered a comfortable way to do that. They will live a typical life together, but neither will be happy.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet lead a typical life of the time, they are married, but often find faults in each other. They have been married for twenty-three years. Their marriage was one based upon initial lust and attraction. However, over the years they have stopped communicating. Mrs. Bennet is too clumsy and silly, continually embarrassing Mr. Bennet. Mr. Bennet, in turn, takes to teasing Mrs. Bennet continually, and rarely asking her opinion. Mrs. Bennet accuses Mr. Bennet of taking "delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves." Mr. Bennet replies, "You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least" (7). He instead, goes behind her back quite often. This includes setting up visits between eligible men and his daughters. Mr. Bennet seems to almost be tired of his wife and the way she acts. Mrs. Bennet does not get upset when she is the object of her husband's sarcasm and is not intelligent enough to discriminate between important and trivial information. Mrs. Bennet does not understand Mr. Bennet, and while Mrs. Bennet's aim in life is to get her daughters married, preferably to rich men, Mr. Bennet is not interested in family affairs and does not seem to think much of his daughters, "they are all silly and ignorant like other girls" (7); Jane Austen tells us his favorite daughter is Elizabeth, "I must throw a good word for my Lizzy" (6). They never agree on much of anything, and try to ignore each other as much as possible. They are almost never together when not forced to be throughout the novel. Elizabeth judges their marriage

critically throughout the novel, and this is what leads her to almost believe that happiness in marriage is not always possible. It is obvious that she looks up to her father, and respects him, and is always embarrassed by her mother. She appears to be running away from any man that could cause her to be in a situation like that of her parent's. She realizes that if there is no respect in a marriage, the marriage will not work (68). What happens to them is exactly what could have happened to Mr. Darcy had he not married Elizabeth. What was initial attraction to beauty and youth, faded because of a lack of substance. Mr. Bennett is the one who at the end made the mistake; he even admits this to Elizabeth at the end of the novel. Their marriage, though completely and utterly a failure, not only ruined them, but set their children up to be very peculiar and have serious relationship issues.

Lydia, the daughter most resembling (in actions) Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Wickham, represents one of the worst marriages in the novel. She is a silly, trivial girl who makes foolish decisions. They meet at a dance for the regiment, and Mr. Wickham is almost immediately attracted to Elizabeth. However, he instead pursues a woman with a family fortune he would inherit. Lydia, and Kitty Bennett follow the regiment once they move, hoping to find a husband in the ranks. This is where Lydia makes a critical mistake. She runs away with Mr. Wickham. He, however, has no intentions of actually marrying her; he was simply running to cover his debts. He takes Lydia with him because he can, because he has power over her. She worships the ground he walks on, and he would never deny himself someone who idolizes him the way she does. This is going to ruin her public persona, and leave her alone forever. Darcy, however, saves both of them. He says he will pay Wickham's debts if he marries Lydia. While this saves them, it makes their marriage a sham. Lydia is foolish, and believes he is marrying her because he loves her. Wickham is going to be stuck in a marriage with a woman he does not care about.

At the end of the novel, it is revealed that they are never really happy. They constantly have debt, and need to turn to the Bennet sisters for money. They even stay with Jane and Bingley a lot of the time. They are probably one of the worst marriages. They are not in love, and they are both just silly, and can use each other to further their own selfish urges.

The marriages in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* range from absolutely perfect, to downright ugly. The marriages based on love, respect, and friendships are the ones that will lead to happy lives. The ones based on money, lust, and convenience, are bound to unhappiness and neglect. Relationships in *Pride and Prejudice* run the full gamut of what relationships in the Victorian Era could be. This is really Jane Austen commenting on what she viewed marriage to be. Through the characters in her novel, Jane Austen really shows the opportunities available to women of her time.



Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003. Print.