

## **Bakalářská práce**

# **Beyond Conventions. Exploring Marital Dynamics and Female Strategies in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility**

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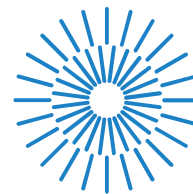
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## Zadání bakalářské práce

# Beyond Conventions. Exploring Marital Dynamics and Female Strategies in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*

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## Zásady pro vypracování:

The thesis analyzes the different types of marriages in the novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen and considers what possibilities the main heroines have for achieving their desired marriages. It delves into the complexities and nuances of the various types of marriages and examines the limitations, obstacles, and transformations that the heroines undergo, as well as how they navigate societal conventions and ultimately achieve their goals. By examining the two novels the thesis will explore whether the two books complement each other on the issue or if there might be a change in how the theme of female strategies in relation to marriage is depicted.

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## **Anotace**

Cílem této práce je analyzovat literární dílo Jane Austenové, konkrétně romány *Pýcha a předsudek* a *Rozum a cit* z hlediska motivů pro uzavření manželství. Zahrnuje to i seznamování a manželství. Cílem je rozlišit určité typy manželství do specifických kategorií, které jsou také charakterizovány. Jsou to následující kategorie: manželství jako podnikání za účelem zisku a manželství jako akt lásky. Teoretická část se zaměřuje na historické a společenské pozadí autorky a obou románů. Tato sekce zahrnuje také popis a diskusi hlavních témat obou románů souvisejících s manželstvím. Témata se dotýkají statusu a rolí žen ve společnosti tehdejší doby, názorů společnosti obecně, mužské nadřazenosti ve společnosti atd.

**Klíčová slova:** nezávislost žen, proto-feminismus, Jane Austen, Jane Austenová, *Pýcha a Předsudek*, *Rozum a cit*, Elizabeth Bennett, manželství, manželská dynamika, společenské postavení, status ženy, strategie vedoucí ke sňatku, společenské normy, zásnuby

## **Annotation**

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the literary work of Jane Austen, specifically the novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* from the point of view of motives for concluding a wedding. This includes courtship and marriage. The aim is to differentiate certain types of marriage into specific categories which are also characterized. These are the following categories: marriage as a business for gain and marriage as an act of love. The theoretical part focuses on the historical and social background of the author and both novels. This section also includes a description and discussion of the main themes of both novels related to marriage. The topics touch on the status and roles of women in society at that time, the opinion of society in general, male superiority in society, etc.

**Key words:** women's independence, proto-feminism, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, Elizabeth Bennett, marriage, Marital dynamics, Social status, Women's status, Strategies leading to marriage, Social norms, Courtship

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## Introduction

The books *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* written by Jane Austen (1775-1817) belong to all time classics of literature, treasured by generations of women not only for the romantic plot and the characters that entered popular culture, such as Mr. Darcy, Lizzie Bennet or Emma Woodhouse, but also for being one of the wittiest comedies of manners ever written. The universally acknowledged value of her literary work secured Jane Austen a rightful place at the pinnacle of literature on the verge of the 18th and 19th century.

From the perspective of socio-cultural research, Austen's books provide us with value far beyond mere romantic comedy. It is a multi-layered world showcasing the nuances of the Regency era upper middle-class life, its values, morals, culture and worldview. A true treasure trove for the history of everyday life in the sheltered drawing rooms, in the manors set in the bucolic countryside, distant from the hotspots of industrial upsurge and colonialist British politics. Austen, even though part of this world to the last fiber of her being, is skillfully exposing the hypocrisy, indolence and pride of the landed gentry, among which the narrative of the story takes place. She is sardonic and acute in her judgments, ironic and entertaining in her observations, yet she scarcely succeeds to overcome the limits of her day and time. Austen is sometimes called a proto-feminist and it is therefore one of the goals to explore these tendencies in her work.

What strikes the present-day reader is the unequivocal emphasis of the heroines of Austen's books on securing themselves a marriage. The preliminary question when writing this thesis might seem naive - why does marriage represent the major subject of virtually all Austen's books? This inevitably leads us to examination of Austen's life, of the Regency era marriage of the middle classes and the landed gentry, the social expectations of what a young Lady ought (not) to be and the history of marriage. By the rule of association, one arrives at the problem of contemporary marital law, especially that of primogeniture that caused so much trouble for Austen's fictional Dashwood and Bennet families. The gender inequality that leads to abysmal differences in the rights of inheritance for men and women is also of paramount importance. It is essential not to forget about the fictional character of the stories, but the retrospective into the history shows us that the manners presented in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* are relatively accurate. The characters, the outcomes for the heroines and the story devices are made

up and based on the need to build a good story, but the underlying principles and social norms come across as true, as one can ascertain in the abundant literature to the subject. In order to build a scaffolding that would carry the practical part of this thesis, all the mentioned aspects will be addressed in a detail sufficient to arrive at sound conclusions.

The theoretical part first introduces selected social and cultural norms shaping marital relationships, including law, moral code and expectations related to the social standing, gender roles etc. There will be a description of the reflection of themes in the social and historical context of the time in which Austen wrote and how this context influenced the behavior of the characters and their decision-making. In the last subchapter called “Proto-Feminism or just a Quest for Harmonious Marriage?” the question will be explored whether Austen can be considered a pioneer of Feminism or not. After all, the plot of Austen's novels is deeply intertwined with gender themes, a certain critique of male superiority in society, but her heroines find their place in society through finding a compatible man and having a happy marriage.

Subsequently, in the chapter called “Austen’s Exploration of Courtship Conventions” we will delve deeper into the social ecosystem, where Ladies were supposed to be passive and expected to wait for a man to approach and court them. This led to covert strategies and vile competition among Ladies for the most desirable matches. We will address those that can be demonstrated on the examples from the selected works by Austen.

In the practical part different marriage types will be analyzed. Honoring the title of the thesis the more unorthodox takes on the subject of marriage will be shown, such as the question of marriage out of love, compared to the marriage as a ‘business transaction’, marriages based on elopement, an adventurous, yet well tested way to avoid the unconsenting parents or guardians. The conclusive subchapter of the third chapter will attempt to draw a summary of the genesis of Austen’s concept of marriage as it evolved from her earlier works to her last novels.

The aim of this bachelor’s thesis is not just to explore how the books present the subject of marriage and analyze the strategies of women to secure a match. The ultimate goal is to explore the depth of Austen’s progressive views on marriage and what it does entail for her reputation as a proto-feminist writer. Do Austen’s books, her characters and their relationships prove her being a trail blazer of women’s rights and emancipation?

It has been noted time and again that Austen presents some views that surpass contemporary views on courtship and marriage. There is an ongoing discussion with opposing views. One of them pinpoints Austen's preference of the so-called companionate marriage, her apparent frustration from inequality of women and men in matters of law etc. The other view brings forward the fact that Austen never left the safe waters of her class and time, and that her heroines eventually end up happily married, living with a man of rank, wealth and superior character qualities. In order to explore the question this thesis strives to elucidate, an analysis of the concept of marriage development will be attempted. Did her standards evolve over time and did this process mirror in her books? Was Austen a proto-feminist, or rather a woman, who refused to settle for a suboptimal marriage, and who impressed into her books the moral message to her readers that they shouldn't either?

I declare that I have used AI tools in accordance with the principles of academic integrity. The AI tools used are Grammarly and DeepL translator. These tools were used to: a) improve the English style of writing by reformulating provided inputs written by the author, b) provide translations of difficult concepts, c) give suggestions of better wording and formulations throughout the work.

## **1 Jane Austen, the Regency Era and Marital Conventions**

Austen's life was, as is often claimed by her biographers, uneventful and sheltered (Austen 1994b, 2). This often-reproduced opinion apparently stemmed from the first biographical sketch written by Austen's brother, who described her life thus: "Short and easy will be the task of the mere biographer. A life of usefulness, literature, and religion, was not by any means a life of event." (Austen 1818, 5). We will lay aside whether Austen's life can be considered eventful or not and contend with a fairly confident statement that 'uneventful' is not the term to describe England of her day. Great Britain was involved in a number of wars, such as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the American War of Independence (1775-1783), and the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) (Berg and Hudson 2002, 45). Nevertheless, Austen tended to avoid mentioning war in her work, even though soldiers and other military personnel (very attractive in the eyes of girls of that era) often appeared among her characters (Fulford 2002, 153–78). Despite the existence of these conflicts, the atmosphere of her texts can be characterized as harmonious and peaceful.

Albeit Austen's works don't reflect high politics and changes in society directly, some of the fresh wind did reach the drawing rooms of her protagonists, the accomplished Ladies, who were sheltered from the harsh realities of the world (and patronized into the position of tender, non-argumentative beings whose key virtue was being decorative) (Downie 2006, 43). In the following subchapters some essential theoretical prerequisites will be addressed, necessary to set a stage for the analysis of the female strategies - that is the situation of the landed gentry and its social customs, but also a brief probe into the life and work of Austen. Even though some of the conclusions the thesis will arrive at are not dependent on biographical knowledge of Austen's life, a basic outline of it is surely indispensable.

## 1.1 Jane Austen as a Writer

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in Steventon. She had six brothers and an older sister, Cassandra, with whom she was very close, as evidenced by their preserved correspondence (Austen, 1952). Austen acquired most of her knowledge home-schooled by her father, with brief episodes of education in Reading and Oxford (Tomalin 1997, 12-15). Jane Austen was a very good and active reader, which perhaps contributed to her keen awareness of the demands and needs of readers, as well as her knowledge of the specifics of her favorite literary form (Harman, 2010, 2). Jane aspired to become a full-time writer but had to fulfill domestic and social duties (Harman, 2010, 3). Jane faced the expectations to marry, because among her class it was not customary for women to make a living. She had suitors, such as Irishman Tom Lefroy, whom she most likely loved, but just like her sister Cassandra, whose suitor died a tragic death, she eventually never married (Tomalin 1997, 20-34).

Written over the span of her literary career, Jane Austen penned the following novels: *Northanger Abbey* (written around 1798 but not published until 1817), *Sense and Sensibility* (1795-1797), *Pride and Prejudice* (1796-1797), *Mansfield Park* (1811-1813), *Emma* (1814-1815), and *Persuasion* (1815-1816), aside from other short stories and countless letters. She initially wrote under various pseudonyms, with her father and later her brother providing substantial help in publishing (Güney, 2008, 527).

In various literature, Austen is placed in different artistic movements. Some consider Jane Austen a representative of Romanticism, which emerged as a reaction to the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the horrors of the Napoleonic Wars (Jarvis 2004, 123). In Romantic art, creative freedom, emotions, faith, and imagination were often emphasized. Popular themes included the portrayal of unrestrained heroes, societal convention breakers, and social outcasts, who were rejected by the public for various reasons (Hamilton 2016, 165). The examples of Lord Byron, or Percy Bysshe Shelly whose art was an extension of their adventurous, emotional personalities are perfect examples of the ethos of Romanticism. Admittedly, Austen keeps emotions very under the lid for her heroes, but still some of the tropes of the Romance genre are present (MacCarthy 2002, 146).

Other authors see Austen's novels also carrying elements of Realism. Some emphasize that Austen can be classified among the early Realists of the 18th century. Austen did not detail social events, did not intertwine the plot with historical events, and did not

particularly react to significant events in her work. It is not entirely clear from her writing in which period the events take place. It's a question of whether she did not find it essential for the construction of the plot or whether she utilized the fact that in her literary world, her own rules could apply. Nevertheless, Austen largely described the everyday reality of ordinary people as she knew it from her real world (Griffin 1963, 36-52).

Early Realism is characterized by striving for a realistic and objective depiction of the world, interest in social issues, including differences between the rich and poor, insoluble moral dilemmas, and coping with changes in society (Griffin 1963, 36-52). Later Realism differs from early Realism in its exclusive interest in the individual as a personality, who is subjected to challenging and ambiguous moral decisions by fate, as we can observe for instance in the works by Thomas Hardy (Slattery 1972, 55-62).

In Austen's approach, we can observe an interest in the community, family, close relationships, social mobility, and human societies in general, but she does not shy away from subjects such as prostitution, abduction, having sex out of wedlock, subject of bastard children, which are presented in rather delicate language, but still, and that is of vital importance - she does not pretend that these things do not exist in the world, on the contrary, she skillfully uses these "horrors" to give suspense and set stakes high in her narrative. This sets Austen into the group of writers, who employed the methods of Realism to achieve more relatable universe for their readers. She was oftentimes called a miniaturist (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 107).

Aside from Realism and Romantism, another term was often ascribed to Austen's work - the Comedy of Manners. This literary-dramatic genre is characterized by witty, elegant, and clever dialogues, which Austen often employed. It is usually marked by satire directed against moralists, hypocrites, and fools (Priydarshi 2020, 21-23). Austen is often criticizing the morals of high society, especially those for whom wealth and status are of utmost importance.

While it cannot be said that her family was financially prosperous, they were very social, had certain connections to the rural gentry and aristocracy, were respected and socially desirable, and had many acquaintances. Austen's family was popular and had many visitors regularly. They often attended balls, providing the girls ample opportunities to meet suitable young men and demonstrate their social skills, including conversation and dance (Austen 1952, 2-67).

Austen is best known for her romantic plots following bold and headstrong, very relatable young female protagonists that struck chord with female readers all around the world. The characters in her novels are richly illustrated through clever dialogue. All that put together with the dynamics of external and internal conflicts in Austen's novels that ring true today as they did in Austen's era, make Austen's novels into timeless classics. We could argue that Austen is growing all the more popular, because the stories are now shrouded in nostalgia for the old times and fascination with the Regency Era as a time of thriving fashion, arts and elegance. Subsequently, Austen's novels have never gone out of print. Austen became a cult author for intellectuals from the upper and upper-middle classes and later a globally popular figure and her novels have never gone out of print (Harman 2000, 83).

Austen's books were often called 'courtship novels' (Green 1991, 153). A conventional courtship novel dealt predominantly with the subject of courtship. Marriage was the ultimate goal of the heroines. Fleeting glance over the plot of Austen's novels might bring such a conclusion. Yet, as Morrison points out, "the heroes are not presented as the professed lovers of the heroines. Rather the heroine spends the better part of the novel observing the hero's conduct in relations with others, very often as he pays court to another woman." (Morisson 1994, 338). The courtship therefore is an important backdrop to the narrative, but is not its chief objective. As Magee suggests, courtship and marriage serves as an instrument for the growth and maturation of the characters (Magee 1987, 198). Their subsequent independence of choice to marry, not to marry or marry on their own terms seems to be more of the underlying message.

Austen's novels check all the boxes of a courtship novel, looking on a surface as another novel dealing with tame subject of love and pursuit of marriage. The patriarchal literary criticism of the time was therefore not such, sisters Brontë faced hundred years later with their bold novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (Green 1991, 345). As long as the writer did not stray from the expectations laid on such genre, he was left to his own devices. Austen, who also wrote about the pursuit of marriage, managed to veil the subjects that the present-day reader is more apt to decipher, by presenting it in the form of a conventional courtship novel that did not cause passionate opposition. It is to be assumed that if the books harbored any openly oppositional counter-societal tendencies, it wouldn't come anywhere near the positive reception and popularity among the aristocracy and higher classes at the time (Honan 1986, 18). The aspect of Austen's story plots that

heavily rely on courtship and marriage was enough to repel any serious criticism, yet succeeded to plant the seeds of female independence which bloomed in the similarly themed books by the authors such as a generation younger Charlotte Brontë with *Jane Eyre*. (Brontë 1987). It can be therefore argued that Austen skillfully used the customary literary norms to pursue subjects of personal decision making and the questions of individual choice, manifesting itself against the backdrop of the conventions of the time without disturbing the equilibrium of the class.

Jane Austen began the initial draft of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1795 while residing in Steventon, where the manuscript bore the title *Elinor & Marianne* (Johnson and Tuite 2009, 134-155). Austen proceeded to revise the text during her time in her home in Steventon between 1797 and 1798, and later revisited the manuscript once more during her residence in Chawton between 1809 and 1810. Jane's brother Henry took on the role of her informal literary agent, arranging for the publication of her novel with Thomas Egerton. The novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, was published on commission (indicating that the financial risk rested on the author rather than the publisher). It made its debut at the end of October 1811 (Jane Austen's House 2024a).

*Pride and Prejudice* was Jane Austen's second published novel. Originally it was drafted in 1796 while she resided in Steventon. The manuscript bore the title *First Impressions*. However, Austen undertook substantial revisions from 1811 to 1812 during her time in Chawton, where she also bestowed upon it the title we know today (Jane Austen's House 2024b). Following the success of "Sense & Sensibility," Egerton took the risk of publishing "Pride & Prejudice" by purchasing the copyright rather than operating on commission. Jane initially hoped for £150 but eventually settled for the negotiated sum of £110. The novel was released in January 1813, and its title page proudly proclaimed it as "By the Author of 'Sense & Sensibility'." The first edition swiftly sold out, prompting a second edition later that year and a third in 1817. Since Egerton had acquired the copyright, he reaped the profits from these sales while Jane did not benefit directly (Jane Austen's House 2024c).



## 1.2 The Regency Era and the Landed Gentry Women

The onset of the modern age in Europe, including financial, industrial, and agricultural revolutions indeed brought an unparalleled shift in societal dynamics. For higher social classes, it was a favorable period, but the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen (Butler 1990, 76). The Industrial Revolution, which began at the end of the 18th century, particularly in the cotton textile industry, led to a shift from home and field work to urban factories dominated by machines. Networks of roads, railways, and canals were built, facilitating the rapid transport of goods, raw materials, and people (Allen 2017, 33). London at this time was a leading global financial center. Urbanization associated with mass migration to the cities led to failure to secure dignified living conditions to the factory workers, resulting in uncontrolled urban and factory growth, unregulated waste disposal, worsening hygiene conditions, overcrowding, etc., most deeply felt by the poorest (Copeland 1993, 68).

The women of the landed gentry were living a life in the protection of the manors, castles, stately houses and parsonages. Their social role was firmly set in the fabric made of family expectations, social conventions, and gender-specific limitations (Jackson-Stops 2012, 23). These ladies, who were born into wealthy homes, set out on a path characterized by grace, manners, and achievements fit for affluent society. Even with its limitations, formal schooling focused on teaching them music, dancing, art, and basic literacy, which helped them become refined, elegant and tender. They were expected to handle the social complexities with ease and navigate the world of balls, banquets, and assemblies which were providing them a platform for networking, romance, and socializing. In these elite circles, upholding proper social behavior and maintaining a decent reputation were crucial (Vickery 1998, 328). Austen herself came from a landed gentry (Johnson and Tuite 2009, 1-54).

The main duty placed on landed gentry women by society was to find favorable matches for them. The rules for courtship were highly specific and laced up with tradition and a narrow code of moral conduct that was first and foremost preservative of young girls' virtue. The young lady was supposed to be courted, by no means was she to take the first step in the establishment of a potential relationship which was supposed to lead to marriage (Vickery 1998, 231). The woman was to remain passive and the male was expected to take an active stance and lead. The women were therefore forced to use covert methods of 'making a conquest' (Austen 1994a, 43). As the young girls were kept in absolute ignorance of the basic facts of life and the methods of procreation, the need to guard them

from unwanted attentions of men was devised to protect their innocence and virginity cost what it may. The two young people were under no circumstances to be left alone, lest the gossip would damage the reputation of the young Lady (Magee 1987, 198–208).

The extent of the risks associated with a tarnished reputation is very well portrayed in the episode from *Pride and Prejudice*, where Lizzie Bennet's sister Lydia elopes with George Wickham (Austen 1994b, 275). Considering her lack of fortune, consequence and his ambitions, all of the family was convinced that the opportunistic young man is living with her without the intent to marry her (Austen 1994b, 238). The whole family, including the father and uncle start to search everywhere for the hiding couple. The fact that one of the Bennet daughters is living with a man out of wedlock would ruin the reputation not only of the girl in question, but her extended family (Wilkie 1992, 546). How the sexual relationship out of wedlock was frowned upon is well expressed by the insolent and scathing monologue of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who used the story of the elopement against Lizzie Bennet in the attempt to hamper the budding affection between her and Mr. Darcy. “I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister’s infamous elopement. I know it all; that the young man’s marrying her was a patched-up business, at the expense of your father and uncle. And is such a girl to be my nephew’s sister? Is her husband, who is the son of his late father’s steward, to be his brother? Heaven and earth!—of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?” (Austen 1994b, 275).

The matrimony, an institution sought after by the majority of women of elegance, was crucial for maintaining family continuity, affluence and was frequently set up to concentrate wealth, social prestige, or political influence (Vickery 1998, 244). Matrimony imposed obligations that went beyond personal satisfaction; these included running households, supervising domestic workers, and producing (male) offspring to continue the family line. When their husbands were preoccupied with business or politics, landed gentry women took up the responsibility of overseeing their families' properties (Magee 1987, 198–208). This varied role involved managing household matters, taking part in social and philanthropic endeavors, and making sure everything ran well. These women had few legal rights and were subject to social restrictions despite their high position. Male heirs were favored by inheritance laws. Political engagement for women was still a long way off. Even while married women of landed gentry had certain advantages, their personal agency was limited by the larger social environment (Berg and Hudson 2002, 183).

As Jane Austen herself demonstrates, the landed gentry women managed to find ways to express themselves within the confines of their social roles. Many wrote letters, diaries, novels, poems, and other literary works. Taking part in amateur musicals and plays offered a creative outlet and a means of balancing personal fulfillment with social expectations. The difficulties and limitations were woven throughout their lives with instances of artistic expression and social contribution. A landed gentry female's life in Regency-era England was characterized by a delicate dance between her obligations to her family, her personal goals, and society expectations.

### 1.3 The Marital Conventions in Regency Era According to Law

The circumstances of Austen's characters' struggle are hardly understandable without a concise introduction into the Regency Era marital law. Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* begin with the sobering prospect of losing the standard of living and the imminent need of the young Ladies to secure their position in the upper classes through advantageous marriage (Austen 1994a, Austen 1994b). Especially in the absence of a male heir, which is the case of both Bennet's and Dashwood's family, the death of the father was posing an insurmountable difficulty for the widow and her progeny, who would be eventually driven off the house they learned to call home and face a substantial drop in their income.

In *Sense and Sensibility* the death of Mr. Dashwood actually occurs and the widow and her daughters are left at the mercy of their father's son from the first marriage and his crudely selfish wife Fanny (Austen 1994b). In *Pride and Prejudice* we experience the anguish of the Bennet family, whose house and premises is entailed away to the closest living male relative, in the case of the Bennet family a distant cousin of Mr. Bennet, as he emphatically puts it to his family: "...Mr. Collins, who, when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases" (Austen 1994a, 50).

Austen demonstrates how laws that favor eldest sons over daughters, such as primogeniture, contribute to the relative poverty of women. Due to primogeniture, family estates frequently leave women reliant on the generosity of their male relatives (Treitel 1984, 549–856). Usually created after marriages, settlements provide husbands life interests in estates, with the eldest son being obligated to inherit the property. But there are some exceptions, as *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates. The predilection for firstborn sons affects both younger sons and daughters, making marriage difficult for them. Younger sons can pursue careers in the military, take orders, or become lawyers, but women had no access to school and work, which made marriage essential (Bailey 2015a, unpag.).

Husbands were legally obligated to provide for their wives after marriage, however this protection came at the expense of the wife's loss of legal identity due to coverture. Husbands through the marriage got legal hold of their wives' income and property and were subsequently entitled to it (Treitel 1984, 549–856). In her essay "The Marriage Law of Jane Austen's World," Dr. Bailey (2015a) delves into the intricacies of marriage practices,

shedding light on the legal backdrop influencing some of Austen's narratives that are truly illuminating.

Notably, Bailey examines clandestine marriages, a focal point in *Pride and Prejudice*, elucidating instances like George Wickham's planned elopement with Georgiana Darcy at the age of 15, and later, Wickham's marriage to Lydia Bennet at 16. Despite both brides being of legal age, the crux of the issue lies in marriages proceeding against family objections. This practice, as the described (fictitious) cases, existed in the Regency era and prompted legislators to impose regulations against private ceremonies through the so-called Lord Hardwicke's Act issued in 1753. It mandated public church announcements (banns) for intended marriages, facilitating the raising of objections. While the act allowed for special licenses exempt from banns, parental consent was requisite for minors (Bailey 2015a, unpag.).

The tension building plot in *Pride and Prejudice* arises from Wickham and Lydia's unknown whereabouts after eloping together. The family supposed that the couple decided to elope to Gretna Green in Scotland (beyond the act's jurisdiction) or reside in London and discreetly have their banns read. Eventually it seemed beyond doubt that Wickham actually never intended to marry Lydia at all (Austen 1994b, 208-214). Ultimately, Lydia becomes Mrs. Wickham after Mr. Darcy brokers a financial agreement (Austen 1994b, 232-235). Bailey highlights the cost disparity between a legitimate marriage, even with an undesirable groom, and the potential damage to a young woman's reputation and her sisters' marriage prospects (Bailey 2015a, unpag.).

To conclude, Austen shows how marriage rules and agreements restricted men's and women's options in life as they drifted towards a happy marriage. She also illustrates the difficulties faced by women in particular who had extramarital affairs or committed adultery. The tales of Georgiana Darcy and Lydia Bennet highlight how Lord Hardwicke's Act failed to stop teenage marriage and illicit unions. There is occasionally talk of a disconnect between the written and actual laws. Austen depicts the legal system in action, demonstrating how marriage laws were applied and how parties maneuvered within the established legal frameworks at the day. In conclusion, Austen's novels illuminate the financial complexities of marriage, the social mores, legal procedures, and gender dynamics that influenced people's decisions and obstacles when pursuing marriage in the Regency period.

## 1.4 Reflection of the Shifting Marriage Standards and Expectations

Conventions are ever changing as is the landscape of human relations. As was foreshadowed in the previous chapters, in the late 18th century the prospect of nubial felicity oftentimes stood far behind material security, family ties and class considerations. In the following paragraphs will be demonstrated, how Austen's books pioneered and reflected the budding confidence of women, who began to value themselves for more than mere property of a husband and could dream beyond the confines of their home. Austen's opinions on marriage reflected this societal transformation of the image of marriage very accurately.

The shifting standards of the time reflected the onset of industrial revolution, gradual changes of the middle-class life in the direction of greater freedom of women (Tilly 1994, 115). The rising status of women and their growing confidence reflected the emergence of what can be coined a preference of a companionate marriage. Companionate marriage exemplified a turn towards a more individualistic society, emphasizing marriage as the union of two individuals united by mutual attraction and companionship, rather than solely for the purposes of childbearing, familial ties, and property relations (Simmons 2009, 224).

The term companionate marriage was later popularized by Judge Ben B. Lindsey, who was a vocal proponent of woman suffrage and birth control, who championed the idea of the Modern Woman and a new concept of marriage based on companionship, equality, and respect (*Britannica*, s.v. "Ben B. Lindsey"). Lindsey argued that the traditional respectable woman often used her morally upright image to entice men into emotionless, hollow marriages, which he saw as a centuries-old norm where marriage was viewed as a financial transaction (Weston 2017, para. 1).

Through the context of her own life, in which Austen chose spinsterhood (rather than to violate her ideals and standards), we can easily establish that notions of companionate marriage were on Austen's mind when she was writing her novels (Austen-Leigh 2007, Ch. VI). A manner in which Austen refused a suitor, as described in a memoir quoting by her niece Caroline is illuminating:

I conjecture that the advantages he could offer, and her gratitude for his love, and her long friendship with his family, induced my aunt (Jane) to decide that she would marry him when he should ask her, but that having accepted him she found she was miserable. To be sure, she should not have said 'Yes'

overnight; but I have always respected her for her courage in canceling that 'Yes' the next morning; all worldly advantages would have been to her, and she was of an age to know this quite well (she was nearly twenty-seven). My aunts had very small fortunes; and on their father's death, they and their mother would be, they were aware, but poorly off. I believe most young women so circumstanced would have gone on trusting to love after marriage. (Austen-Leigh 2007, Ch. VI.)

With that in mind, we can see that the strive of Elizabeth Bennet and the two elder Dashwood sisters for the optimal outcome rather than settling for an unsuitable match for purely material considerations (to save themselves from want) is gaining more profound ground. Austen, through the opinions of her characters and how they navigate their environment and circumstances, clearly reflected that the companionate marriage is the ultimate ideal (Alquraidhy 2021, 43). It is, after all, the compatibility of characters and the companionship Austen judges to be the ground stones of long and successful marriage, as is demonstrated by the description of the ill-judged marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good-humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (Austen 1994a, Ch. XLII)

Taking this quotation as a ground stone, Austen made her heroines strive for a marriage where respect, esteem and confidence were conditions sine qua non. None of the heroines Austen's readers were lead to cherish, never compromised on their determination to remain true to the ideal of companionate marriage, which would stem only from the mutual understanding of a kindred spirit that is inherently equal. Austen's views refine and evolve gradually from the *Northanger Abbey* to *Emma*, in the latter reaching the ultimate expression of the ideal marriage. Austen delivers her ideas on what clearly

violates her ideas of 'companionate marriage' on the examples of the parents of the Bennet girls and the calculated marriage of Charlotte Lucas to Mr. Collins. Both are presented as deterring examples of marriages set from the wrong reasons.

The independence of choice we find in Jane Eyre, who also seeks the aspect of companionship on equal footing (Brontë, 1897). The equality here is one of the vital aspects and the journey of Jane Eyre to the reunion with Edward Rochester leads through ordeal of want and need. The story establishes a story of morality and dignity where the heroine would rather face dire outcomes than violate her soul and heart. Jane Eyre, just like Elizabeth Bennet, and very much like Jane Austen herself, refuses to compromise. Jane Eyre values herself too much to stay with her love and live out of wedlock. She returns to Edward Rochester only after he is widowed, and she is made rich by the unexpected inheritance from her uncle. Only then she is equal to him, and only on terms of equality is she to live with him. Although Charlotte Brontë did subject Austen's novels to pronounced criticism, the core ideas of gender equality are markedly similar and witness societal shift in the understanding of relationships the whole civilization was going through and that reflected in the works of women writers (Brody 1992, 115).



## 1.5 Proto-Feminism or just a Quest for Harmonious Marriage?

Undoubtedly, Jane Austen set the foundational stone for other female writers such as Charlotte Bronte who took the beacon in further exploring the unsettling questions about the standing and role of women and their plight in the male dominated world (Brody 1992, 24).

Jane Austen was aware of her unequal position in a patriarchal society compared to men, as well as her incompetence and helplessness to change this situation. However, she refused to submit to certain societal conventions that she did not internalize, and which were not inherent to her. She experienced a deep internal conflict because her dream was to become an independent and successful writer, but she also possessed personal qualities such as modesty and did not want to bring shame upon herself or her family or evoke a sense of eccentricity. Therefore, she initially published her first works anonymously under the pseudonym "By a Lady" with the help of her brother (Všetečková, 2009, p. 47).

Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 124) brought together a case of Austen's literary juvenilia and asserted that in her youth Austen often entertained herself by envisioning drama and head over heels romance with scandalous events of matricide, homicide or patricide, or elopements. Her young characters whose unbridled passions were greater than that of Lydia Bennet, were flirtatious, flamboyant and adventurous. The more restrained, elegant prose of her mature years therefore represents her conscious effort to steer away from the "cheap" romantic literature of the day, which affect young women in not very positive way - pretty much like the present-day cheap romance with "men who lost their shirts." Austen's narratives and plots do not abandon themes of adultery, elopement or even a duel, but all of these events are taking place in the backdrop.

Austen was among the first authors to portray her heroines from a new perspective. Austen was probably inspired by the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft, considered one of the founders of feminism. Wollstonecraft's significant work is *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). There is no direct proof that Austen read Mary Wollstonecraft and her watershed treatise, the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Wollstonecraft 1972). Wollstonecraft believed that women were perceived as inferior to men largely because they did not have equal access to education. Doubting that women could write as well as men, their decision itself to 'take the pen' was seen as an intrusion to sovereignly male domain (Gilbert and Gubar 2000). Therefore, female writers often published their works under male

pseudonyms (Morris, 2000, p. 148). The same was true in other artistic fields, not just literature. For instance, few believed that a woman could paint as well as a man (Oliverius, 1988, p. 108).

In her books, Austen does not criticize the societal setup directly. Austen wrote: “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony.” (Thierry, 2007, p. 351). Austen was aware that marriage is practical. At the same time, in her work, she points out that marriage is conceived as a business and a means of enrichment, something she does not recognize, thereby indirectly criticizing it (Güney 2008, 42).

Although the plot of Austen's novels is deeply intertwined with gender themes, a certain critique of male superiority in society, and what can be only seen as proto-feminist ideas, her heroines find their place in society through finding a compatible man and having a happy marriage. Through this marriage, men and women in the stories realize themselves and achieve a new and higher level of their development (Magee 1987, 198–208). Austen herself enjoyed and sought the company of men but would likely have married only a man who was her intellectual equal, who would support her in her work and thoughts, and was also a good and kind person. She did not perceive it as necessary to marry someone who did not meet her standards, and she refused to lower her standards and conform to societal expectations (Austen 1952, 1-67).

Austen's novels often focus on the experiences and challenges that come with a woman's life in a society with clearly defined gender roles, reflecting the society. Austen's stories explore what it meant to be a woman at that time, highlighting the limited freedoms and rigid expectations regarding acceptable female behavior and roles in society (Vickery 1998, 93). A significant theme that clearly emerges from Austen's works is the essential need for a woman to be provided for. A woman had to be married to have any say in society. If she was unmarried, her living father or brothers had to take care of her. A widow had a much higher status in society than an unmarried woman (Phlegley 2012, 43).

In order to understand Austen's world, there is another key tenet that needs clarification - the understanding of love and the evolution of the concept. Love is a fundamental value in contemporary societies: the pursuit of "true love" - a legacy of the Romantism of the late 19th century and the result of the increasing standard of living in the West (Baumard 2022, 506). The growing importance of love in European history

has been thoroughly documented. Historian Lawrence Stone characterized this escalation of the importance of love as "probably the most significant shift in thinking that occurred during the early modern period and perhaps even in the last millennium" (Baumard et al. 2022, 506-522). He thus touches on the idea that the importance of love develops especially in times of abundance. Basic human needs are met, and people thus gain the opportunity to move to a higher level and self-actualize and personally develop in higher needs. They can afford what their soul demands, which in times of abundance makes itself heard. We can trace this approach towards love reflected in Austen's novels.

## 2 Austen's Exploration of Courtship Conventions

Conventional courtship within the circles of landed gentry of the Regency Era, as depicted in Jane Austen's novels, was a meticulously structured and formal affair governed by social norms (Magee 1987, 45). From the socio-cultural perspective, young adulthood was a pivotal time in the life of the higher classes of 18th century England. This was even more true for women, whose fortune and well-being depended on an advantageous match. The 'courtship novel' emerged already in the 17th century to accommodate the growing interest of women readers in the subject of courtship and marriage and in the 18th century it only grew in popularity - also because of the changing expectations of women as to relationships and marriage (Green 1991, 18).

In Austen's books we can witness the silent battle taking place under the surface of shy smiles and battering eyelashes, where women fought to win affections of a male without looking at all that this is their goal. The number of 'accomplished young Ladies' was always higher than the eligible bachelors, who were 'on the market' (Berend 2000, 950). Most of the Austen's novels skillfully dissect this universe and set stakes high for the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, who either succeed in finding a gentleman to marry or face an inevitable fate of a spinster at mercy of relatives to support them (Green 1991, 18). Rather than providing an exhausting overview of the multifaceted strategies of 'elegant females' towards the goal of attracting a suitable partner, prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th century, this chapter will focus on the subtle hints Austen weaved into her narratives that prove that she subjected the habits and mores of the time to critical thinking, thus surpassing the conventions of the day, regarding courtship and marriage.

The courtship was an indispensable foreplay leading towards the ultimate goal of marriage for young men and women of the gentry class (Magee 1987, 45). Initial introductions, often facilitated by family members or acquaintances, marked the beginning of courtship, with formal gatherings like balls and social events providing the backdrop for eligible individuals to meet and interact under the supervision of the family or chaperone of the young Lady, usually a married sister, aunt or other trustworthy older Lady whose role was to safeguard her protégé from the dangers of seduction, or from undesirable matches (Wilkie 1992, 230).

Young women were expected to exhibit qualities of beauty, modesty, virtue and innocence. The patriarchal tradition was setting double standards on women, whose ruined reputation was easily secured by talking to men without a chaperone or straying out of sight with a suitor. The virginity of the bride was of paramount importance and so the reputation of the young Lady had to be protected at all costs (Dooley 2016, para. 4). Correspondence and casual addressing by first names were reserved for the engaged only. Young women were always chaperoned in public, safeguarding their reputations (Richardson 2021, para. 3).

Young men on the other hand were to display their ability to provide for a family and uphold social standing. Contrasting with the stringent rules for women, men faced fewer restrictions. They tended to marry later, often embarking on the "Grand Tour" of Europe, where they gained sexual experience (Goldsmith 2020, 220). This double standard of providing males with ample experience whereas sheltering young women from any, was typical for the patriarchal standards of the day. Men applied different standards to potential wives versus casual liaisons, with the latter viewed as inconsequential while any hint of impropriety on the part of a prospective wife could tarnish her reputation irreparably (Richardson 2021, para. 4).

## 2.1 Dance, an Emblem of Marriage and a Glimpse of Sexual Freedom

In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney calls country dance “an emblem of marriage.” (Austen 1995, Ch. 10). Balls are an important theme in Austen’s novels and were so in the life of Jane Austen herself (Austen-Leigh 2007, 93). Austen’s personal preferences made their way into her novels as well, where both the country and aristocracy balls serve to facilitate the interaction of the main characters of the stories (Fullerton 2012, 24).

Balls where dancing occurred were the ideal opportunity to form new relationships and friendships and strengthen social and romantic bonds. At balls, people ate, drank, danced, and played games. Couples were closely observed, and if seen dancing more than two sets together, society would consider them engaged. They also observed others, who were commenting on their dancing skills, fashion, and ability to navigate society and etiquette (Mullan 2012, 145).

Couples danced a series of formal dances such as boulanges, cotillions and quadrilles. The complexity of the dances that required precise footwork and coordination among the couples. The quadrille for instance consisted of a series of figures or patterns, with each couple taking turns to perform these figures in a synchronized manner. This dance required a good understanding of the steps. Given the importance of the young Lady being led in the society, dance classes were of paramount importance (Puterbaugh 2013, 1).

At the Netherfield ball, the most famous dance throughout Austen’s novels, Elizabeth finds herself obliged to dance with Mr. Collins. To decline one dance invitation meant turning down all others for the evening (Austen 1994a, 73). Thus, Elisabeth’s initial two dances (the limit with the same partner) become what she terms “dances of mortification” (Austen 1994a, 73). Mr. Collins, often unaware of his missteps, unwittingly brings her “all the shame and misery that an unpleasant partner for a couple of dances can bestow” (Austen 1994a, 73). Meanwhile, he remains oblivious to his clumsiness, believing himself to have performed well. He of course believed the dance being a precursor to his marriage proposal the following day (Mullan 2013, para. 3).

The complex mores of the landed gentry set rather stringent rules of behaviour at the dances and parties. Yet what scholars of Austen’s work agree upon, the balls were the pinnacle and the most unrestrained of all social opportunities to allow young people to flirt, touch and fall in love (Fullerton 2012, Mullan 2012, Stovel 2019). In Austen’s novels as well as in reality, the Edwardian and Victorian ballrooms offered one of the best

opportunities of courtship and “to be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love” (Austen 1994a, Chapter 3).

When Mrs. Bennet returns full of impressions from the ball at Lucas’s, her enthusiasm is almost palpable when she says: “we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball... Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Everybody said how well she looked; and Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. Only think of *that*, my dear: he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time...” (Austen 1994a, Chapter 3).

In the laced-up environment of chaperones and strict moral code, ball dances were rare occasions for men and women to come close to one another without the jeopardy to the carefully guarded reputation of the Lady in the couple. Just standing up against one another was considered a step into a relationship. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to claim that dancing was one of the chief female strategies to secure a match in the microcosmos that provided women with very little opportunities to act freely (Mullan 2013, para. 6).

In her letters to her sister Cassandra, Jane expressed her hedonistic joy of dancing and when describing her interaction with her suitor Tom Lefroy, she discloses enjoyment of her self-proclaimed “shocking” conduct. “You scold me so much in the nice long letter which I have this moment received from you, that I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together” (Austen 1952, 33). Austen too sensed, and transformed these feelings into her narratives and characters, how dancing allowed young people the intimacy and enjoying the mutual attraction and erotic charge, all the more heightened by the obstacles in the way to a romance in the form of conventions and rigid codes of moral conduct.

## 2.2 Accomplishments versus Well-Informed Mind, Cultivated by Extensive Reading

For the Ladies of fashion that occupy the universe of Austen's books, the only widely accepted way to gain adoration for self-improvement was for the so-called accomplishments. Their scope is aptly summarized by Caroline Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*, who described what an "Accomplished Woman" needs to fulfill to deserve such a title. "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word" (Austen 1994a, 33). Austen's views and opinions on the subject can be derived from the dialogue of the protagonists. Mr. Bingley, admiring the patience of women in acquiring the skills, notes: "They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know any one who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time without being informed that she was very accomplished" (Austen 1994a, 33).

Austen herself admired the skills of Ladies in needlework and herself resorted to the handiwork whenever situation warranted to help economy of the household in repairing worn clothes or help with the decoration of home. This was, after all, the only practical use of the skills that the Ladies of the upper classes were led to master. But judging from her books, she was clearly aware that mere accomplishments were in vain, if the "certain something" is missing. A young Lady through the words of Caroline Bingley "must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word (accomplished) will be but half deserved" (Austen 1994a, 33).

Even though the Enlightenment contributed to the promotion of the equality of sexes, the middle-class England had far to go yet. In the moral, intellectual or rational sense women were still perceived as lesser to men (Rosenberg 1983, 34-46). Domestic duties as housewives and mothers, who create pleasant home for men, didn't require extensive education. But this notion also began to change and with the fashionability of education a number of girl boarding schools emerged in the late 18th century (Simonton 2004, 34-37). In the upper classes the education of women was mostly governed from home, Queen Elisabeth (1926-2022) herself received only home-schooling, quite in the tradition of the gentle Ladies. It is beyond the scope of this work to delve deeper into the aspects of the education of women in the followed period.



What we find is that the accomplishments the gentlewomen were encouraged to pursue all belonged to the realm of harmless diversions that were supposed to make them entertaining, but not overtly intellectual companions to men (Rosenberg 1983, 24-26). Their pianoforte playing, singing, speaking languages such as French and Italian, netting purses and painting tables or adorning screens were all devised to keep their hands and heads pleasantly, peacefully preoccupied, thus maintaining the status quo of the patriarchal order.

Austen's heroines Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse all are found lacking in some of the disciplines found vital to deem them accomplished to the standards of Caroline Bingley cited above (Austen 1994a, 33). This well illustrates Austen's sardonic view on the coveted skills or "accomplishments" and points towards her appreciation of different set of skills: a well-informed mind, education and sense of humor. She poured her own standards for a male into her male heroes, such as the iconic Mr. Darcy, who claimed - referring to the ideally accomplished Lady that "...she must yet add something more substantial in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (Austen 1994a, 33).

Austen seems to subconsciously feel the patronizing effect of being forced to learn only what did not interfere with male world. Wives, sisters and daughters were kept in ignorance of more serious subjects. Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneer of proto-feminism and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1792), expressed concern not about the acquisition of skills such as music and drawing, but about the notion that these pursuits should supersede the study of history, philosophy, and classics. Wollstonecraft advocated passionately for women to be regarded not as mere ornaments, but as rational beings with moral agency. She criticized the prevailing attitude that emphasized accomplishments over virtues, stating, "Women have been allowed to remain in ignorance, and slavish dependence many, many years, and vanity makes them value accomplishments more than virtues" (Scudeler 2021, sec. 2).

### 2.3 Material Considerations, Equality and Independence

The subject of money, sustenance and retainment of the comfort of gentlemanly lifestyle belongs to chief themes of Austen's novels. It provides source of suspense and never-ending anguish for the heroines. Austen herself throughout her life experienced financial difficulties and her non-existent dowry undoubtedly influenced the outcome of her first romance with Irish law student Tom Lefroy. Regardless of their mutual attraction, Lefroy probably decided against marrying Jane, because he was forced to make material considerations to support his large family. This event occurred just around Austen's writing of *Sense and Sensibility*. In both novels the economy of marriage forms decisions of many characters, such as Mr. Wickham and Mr. Willoughby, who are painted in very unfavorable light. Story twists often revolve about an unexpected marriage for money, to a wealthy heiress - one of the most convenient ways for an unscrupulous young man to get the resources for lavish style of living.

From Austen's perspective, getting married for money alone is bad, but getting married without having financial stability on at least one side is foolish, and therefore bad also. This is the essential stance of Austen that does not change throughout her writing career (Bailey 2015a, unpag). In *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen 1994b), the subject of money is a source of differing views of the two main characters, Elinor, and Marianne Dashwood. Elinor, the more practical and prudent of the sisters, reacts with laughter to Marianne's idea that an annual income of 2,000 pounds is insufficient. Marianne sees this income as the minimum for maintaining a decent standard of living (including servants, carriages, and hunting horses).

“About eighteen hundred or two thousand a-year; not more than that.” Elinor laughed. “Two thousand a-year! One is my wealth! I guessed how it would end.”

“And yet two thousand a-year is a very moderate income,” said Marianne.

— “A family cannot well be maintained on a smaller. I am sure I am not extravagant in my demands. A proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters, cannot be supported on less.” (Austen, 1994b, 88).

Emma Woodhouse from the novel *Emma* (written around the time when Austen finally succeeded to sell some of her manuscripts and managed to live independently), unlike the daughters in the Bennet and Dashwood family was rich, therefore her choice to (not) marry depended fully on whether she finds the ideal partner who fulfills her criteria of mutual respect, equality. She was not pressed by material considerations and her choice is therefore fully in her own independent hands. The subject of material security is seen as vital for freedom of choice. Many characters in Austen's novels are forced to act from the perspective of material need and marry strategically.

Austen, and through her characters, are aware that there is no independence where there is no sufficient income. There the question of money is reaching the field of gender equality. Elizabeth Bennet, and Mr. Darcy himself acutely feel the inferiority of her connections, birth but most of all, her relative poverty. The independence in money is the independence of life, source of equality and freedom also in gender sense. Money adds consequence, gravity. Emma Woodhouse (Austen 2014), was independent thanks to her family situation, similarly to Catherine de Bourgh, the wealthy aunt of Mr. Darcy. These two Ladies were fortunate by birth to keep their freedom and live on their own terms. (Austen 1994a, 45) Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents another example of how the change of fortune and unexpected inheritance can cause substantial shift of the power dynamics of the couple. Jane Eyre, rich and free, is now at the same level as Edward Rochester. Only at the terms Jane Eyre finds dignified and just, would she live with the man she loves. (Brontë 1897)

## 2.4 Delicacies of the Elegant Females versus Sincerity

The strict code of moral conduct, impervious hierarchy of the upper classes and the expectations laid on the behaviour of women, sentenced them to passivity in the courting process. The rules of courtship required women to let themselves get wooed and present themselves as modest, quiet and sweet (Phegley 2012, 63). The obligation of young Ladies of upper classes to remain as passive and sweet as humanly possible necessitated the help and assistance of their social circle. This role usually belonged to other women. (Austen 1994a, 1994b, 2014)

These women often were an older acquaintance such as mother, an older sister, aunt or other (married or widowed) well-meaning relative, who would use their influence to act in a role of a matchmaker and/or a chaperone. The Lady would accompany their protégées to picnics, trips and theatricals, remove obstacles, organize a social event, drop a hint or two of the mutual attraction etc (Fletcher 1962, 14-16). In *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennet acts as completely counterproductive force in case of her daughter Jane, Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen 1994b) is trying to help both Miss' Dashwoods by escorting them to town and dropping rather unhelpful hints to their suitors. In *Emma* (Austen 2014), Emma herself is a self-proclaimed matchmaker, who misinterprets Sir Elton's advances and tries to facilitate his union with her friend Miss Smith.

In the setting where the mores of delicacy and angelic facade is to be maintained at all costs, all sorts of ridiculous situations arise. The genius of Austen's witty irony revels in the description of this phenomenon, which she presents with superb skill and to greatly humorous effect. Probably the most accurate example of that is proposal of Mr. Collins to Elisabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, which demonstrates the insolent pride of the short vicar, but most of all the supposed delicacies of the "elegant females," Austen makes fun of.

The reader experiences with the heroine the excruciatingly embarrassing situation of marriage proposal, where the suitor cannot let himself get convinced that the refusal of the marriage offer is meant seriously, arguing that: "As I must, therefore, conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females." (Austen 1994a, 176). To that Elisabeth responds with disbelief, with all the frustration of not being treated on equal terms as a man would.

I do assure you, sir, that I have no pretensions whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart (177).

This scene, humorous as it might seem, harbors in it a core of the heartfelt inequality most heroines of Austen's universe experience. The allusion to "rational creature" and the desired "compliment of being believed sincere" reflects this major pain of the era felt by intelligent women, who asked to be seen as sensible, rational and treated as equals in heart and soul. (177). "Elegant females," however, were deemed ethereal, refined and bestowed with uniquely feminine qualities, some of which is "increasing love by suspense", as Mr. Collins expressed. The belief that women are the weak sex with weak understanding and inferior soul and heart, shrouded in mystery and equipped with some secret, exclusive femininity that needs to be protected, and shielded from the harsh truths of the world, is to Austen a source of frustration. Just by exposing himself as a man, who does not credit a woman with plain sense would be enough to make Elisabeth Bennet refuse Mr. Collins, even if he wasn't short, pompous and spineless.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the character of Marianne, Austen explores the ground of propriety and conventions (Austen 1994b). Marianne, her character fiery, passionate and romantic repeatedly exposes herself to gossip - violating a number of universal laws of delicacy, modesty, demureness and elegance, although most of the time not from inborn rebelliousness, rather romanticism and naivety. Marianne, for instance, spends hours on end alone with her suitor, exploring with him the house he was about to inherit from his aunt. (Austen 1994b, 65).

Elinor is trying to make Marianne see sense, explaining that the feelings of pleasure are not the best compass to navigate life. "I am afraid," replied Elinor, "that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety." This is where the ambivalence of the mores of the time and the natural feeling of propriety enters the game, when Marianne

retorts: “On the contrary, nothing can be a stronger proof of it, Elinor; for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure.” The voice of conventions speaks through Elinor again. “But, my dear Marianne, as it has already exposed you to some very impertinent remarks, do you not now begin to doubt the discretion of your own conduct?” (Austen 1994b, 65).

It is to be argued that the narrative of *Sense and sensibility* as embodied in self-governed Elinor and romantic Marianne are to Austen to first extensive and critical study of the contemporary rules of conduct. Austen never really steps out of her times in truly criticising the status quo, but her line of thinking clearly demonstrates she is well aware of its shortcomings.

The delicacy of manners and limits of conventions reflect also in the narrative about sister Dashwoods in *Sense and Sensibility*. Mrs. Dashwood, for instance refuses to ask out of “romantic delicacy,” as Elinor coined it, whether her daughter Marianne is or is not actually engaged to Mr. Willoughby (Austen 1994b, 82).

Elinor could not deny the truth of this, and she tried to find in it a motive sufficient for their silence (regarding the engagement). But there was one method so direct, so simple, and in her opinion so eligible of knowing the real state of the affair, and of instantly removing all mystery, that she could not help suggesting it to her mother. “Why do you not ask Marianne at once,” said she, “whether she is or she is not engaged to Willoughby? From you, her mother, and so kind, so indulgent a mother, the question could not give offence. It would be the natural result of your affection for her. She used to be all unreserve, and to you more especially.” “I would not ask such a question for the world. Supposing it possible that they are not engaged, what distress would not such an enquiry inflict! At any rate it would be most ungenerous. I should never deserve her confidence again, after forcing from her a confession of what is meant at present to be unacknowledged to any one. I know Marianne’s heart: I know that she dearly loves me, and that I shall not be the last to whom the affair is made known, when circumstances make the revelation of it eligible. I would not attempt to force the confidence of any one; of a child much less; because a sense of duty would prevent the denial which her wishes might

direct.” Elinor thought this generosity overstrained, considering her sister’s youth, and urged the matter farther, but in vain; common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic delicacy. (Austen 1994b, 82)

This, of course, leads to unfortunate outcomes, because Mr. Willoughby, serious or not about his relationship to Marianne, decided to marry with material considerations in mind. At some other instances it wasn’t the delicacy that forbid the necessary mutual understanding. In the universe, where women are not allowed any form of agency, intrigue and scheming enters into the game. Austen’s novels brilliantly illustrate the underhand strategies some women might employ in order to survive in a universe where looking angelic, acting modest and demure, was the highest virtue (Fletcher 1962, 12). Often, a game of luring men in and using methods of deception and lie that were repellent to Austen, was employed by unscrupulous women.

The presented amalgamation of thoughts on society, morality, relationships, courtship and marriage seem to indicate, that Austen, believing in equality of the heart and soul of men and women considered it below the dignity of women to take part in the ridiculous habits of concealment and lack of frankness in which it resulted.

### **3 Comparison of Marriage Categories in Selected Jane Austen's Books**

As was described in previous chapters, marriage stands in the very center of Austen's attention, as it allows her to a) focus on interpersonal relationships, which is her self-proclaimed forte in writing, b) cater to the interests of her readers, who are predominantly women, c) facilitate character development, d) determine through the continuous exploration of the subject, what the ideal form of marriage is. The aim of this part of this thesis is to define marriage categories in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1994a) and *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen 1994b) and assess if there is a discernible development between the two novels as to the approach to marriage.

Through this analysis the insight should be also gained into the core question of this thesis, whether Austen can be considered a proto-feminist writer. Grounded in the chapters previously described, one can safely assume that Austen was very indignant about the inequality in the Regency England that harbored some very discriminatory law that did affect disproportionately women, sons born second in line (third, fourth etc. and children. The contemporary standards of gentility that forbade the marriage among people of differing ranks belonged to another source of frustration to Austen. All of these principles were embodied into her books. Her stories, characters and plot twists heavily rely on the principle of injustice and discrimination that lead readers to sympathize with her characters. Is this, therefore, a question of budding feminist views or rather of the general discontent with the standards of the time that facilitate and perpetuate inequality among folk, regardless of sex?



### **3.1 Marriage as a Business Transaction**

There is no denying that for many Austen's contemporaries material considerations when seeking a husband or wife were of paramount importance. We return to the discriminatory laws of heritage with the principles of primogeniture which set not only women, but also sons, who were not first born, into an unfavorable position (Treitel 1984, 554). Austen often observed the difficulty both groups face, but emphasized that men at least, can pursue careers in law, church, or, in business. Austen's novels depicts not only the questionable morality of marrying for money, as we witness in the characters of Mr. Wickham or Mr. Willoughby, but also covert practices of seduction some women used in order to secure the advantageous marriage they coveted, such as Lucy Steele, and in some respect also Charlotte Lucas (Wilkie 1992, 529–55). The books portray a world of pragmatism, where only the fates of the main heroines, who end up married to their dream men, as if rewarded for their adherence to their high standards.

Austen had first hand experiences with economic difficulties, as her father too was a clergyman, who had to run a boarding school for boys to make ends meet. Her own felicity also was heavily affected by her status (Tomalin 1997, 45). She was courted by Tom Lefroy during the Christmas and New Year's season of 1795-1796, but he was forced by his family to put an end to the flirt with Austen and marry with material considerations in mind (Thierry 2007). It is only logical that Austen's own experiences and the feelings formed her narratives. She surely experienced the disappointment and injustice of the world, which she embodied into her characters. Marianne or Elinor also knew that their dire financial circumstances will mar their hopes for happy marriage with their respective suitors, John Willoughby and Edward Ferrars.

#### **3.1.1 Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas**

One fine example of a marriage as a business transaction in Austen's novels is the marriage of Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1994a). Mr. Collins, on whom the estate where Bennett family lives is entailed, is a foolish, pompous man. His character is revealed to the reader already by his first letter, infused with pomposity and clichés. He comes to Longbourn with the laudable prospect of marrying one of the Bennet daughters and thus solve their looming predicament of poverty after their father's decease.

Elizabeth is unable to convince Mr. Collins, who courts her, to believe that she is "a reasonable creature speaking the truth from her heart," when she refuses his proposal. Mr. Collins is showing in every word that there is no compatibility between them (Peltason 2015, 609-633). Charlotte Lucas, a neighbor of the Bennets and Elizabeth's best friend is far more practical. When Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins, she promptly puts herself in his way. The marriage of Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins therefore represents a very pragmatic union. Charlotte's decision to marry Mr. Collins is brilliantly described thus:

Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable: his society was irksome, and his attachment to her (Charlotte) must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object: it was the only honourable 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 (Austen 1994a, 98).

Mr. Collins is also a clergyman and a close relative of the wealthy Lady Catherine de Bourgh, which is another opportunity for Charlotte to improve her social standing, as she lives in her neighborhood. Their marriage illustrates how relationships and marriages in English society at the time were often driven by economic and social factors more than personal emotions and romantic attraction. Especially in the context of Edwardian England, this marriage belongs to the very typical examples.

### **3.1.2 Mr. and Mrs. Bennet**

Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet in many ways represent similar case to Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins. In this case, though, the insufferably foolish person is not the father, but the mother. The introductory scene of the dialogue between Mr. Bennet and his wife is often quoted as one of the most brilliant portrayals of characters in Austen's novels, because in a few short lines she succeeds to deliver a very vivid picture of both (Mullan 2012, 134).

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married: its solace was visiting and news. (Austen 1994a, 3).

Mrs. Bennet married Mr. Bennet mainly for his property and social status and he married her for her good looks and vivacious personality (Austen 1994a, 23). Throughout the story, it is shown that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have very different personalities and interests, leading to frequent misunderstandings. The marriage is described thus:

Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever; and all his (Mr. Bennet's) views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr. Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on in any of those pleasures which too often console the unfortunate for their folly or their vice. He was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments (Austen 1994a, 208).

These motives of escapism from the unsatisfactory marriage we find in Charlotte Lucas as well. While already married to Mr. Collins, she explained Elizabeth that she spends most of her days in parts of the house her husband does not go to. Mr. Bennet escapes into his library, she in the drawing room, both more than happy not to spend time with their spouse.

### **3.1.3 Lucy Steele and Robert Ferrars**

In *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen 1994b), Lucy Steele employs a calculated strategy to win the heart of Edward Ferrars, clearly with the sole prospect of increasing her social standing. Lucy Steele initially befriends Elinor Dashwood to glean insights into Elinor's feelings for Edward, giving her an advantage in manipulating circumstances to draw closer to him. By revealing the secret engagement to Elinor, Lucy asserts her position in Edward's

life while undermining Elinor's hopes. Exploiting Edward's sense of duty, Lucy emphasizes their supposed engagement, using emotional manipulation to ensure his compliance and secure her place in his affection. The surprising plot twist, when Lucy Steele steals the heart of Edward's younger brother Robert, after her fiancé is disinherited, shows that her affections to Edward were purely material.

#### **3.1.4 John Willoughby and Sophia Grey**

In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, John Willoughby is initially portrayed as a charming and romantic figure, who becomes emotionally invested in a relationship with Marianne Dashwood. To the social circle of Marianne Dashwood who closely watches their interaction, he is displaying genuine affection and passion towards her. According to the habits of the time, such publicly displayed affection should end up in engagement. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Willoughby's affection for Marianne cannot withstand his need to fund his lavish lifestyle.

When confronted with the prospect of losing his inheritance over his affair with Colonel Brandon's protégée Eliza, Willoughby promptly decides upon marrying a wealthy heiress, Miss Sophia Grey to save himself from material worries. He realizes that a union with Miss Grey would secure his financial future and elevate his social standing, offering him the comfort and stability that he desires. He knows that marriage with Marianne would never allow him to retain his lifestyle.

Sophia Grey, on the other hand, is portrayed as a young woman of fortune and social standing. Although her motivations are not described in greater detail in the books, one can conjecture that given her very good social standing, she chooses to marry a handsome, fashionable man, who is not rich, but whose charming manners will provide her with more social credit.

The marriage between John Willoughby and Sophia Grey, therefore, is characterized by a combination of pragmatic considerations on his part and vanity on hers. While Willoughby initially presents himself as a passionate suitor to Marianne, his eventual choice to marry Sophia Grey highlights his desire for financial security and social advancement over his affections.

The description of the marriage of Bennetts clearly indicate that the common reasons for marriage in Austen's time (such as material considerations) might often result in rather unhappy relationships. The examples of Bennet parents, Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins are used both to establish the faults of contemporary conventions and prepare the ground for what Austen believes are the right reasons and motivations for marriage. Austen, who is often considered a great moralist, tries to lay the case for the companionate marriage (Price 1975, 261–80). Of course, Austen is aware that to achieve such a marriage first there must be compatibility, respect and also, a great deal of luck. "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance... it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life," as Charlotte Lucas said to Elizabeth (Austen 1994a, 24).

### **3.2 Marrying in Gretna Green. Clandestine Marriage and Elopement**

As was already mentioned in chapter “1.3. The Marital Conventions in Regency England”, elopement and clandestine marriage posed a social issue so prevalent, it warranted an Act, the so-called Lord Hardwicke’s Act, which was issued in 1753 (Leneman 1999, 161-169). Elopement became one of often employed literary devices and Austen herself used it on numerous occasions, such as George Wickham's planned elopement with Georgiana Darcy at the age of 15, and later, Wickham’s marriage to Lydia Bennet at 16. Both are instances that illustrate the contemporary problem. Despite both brides being of legal age, both marriages would not acquire the consent of the parents or guardians of the bride. Lord Hardwicke’s Act mandated public church announcements (banns) for intended marriages, facilitating the raising of objections. While the act allowed for special licenses exempt from banns, parental consent was requisite for minors (Leneman 1999 , 161–169).

Therefore, couples in Edwardian England often chose to elope and marry in Gretna Green due to several factors that made it an attractive option. Firstly, Gretna Green, a village in Scotland just over the border from England, had lenient marriage laws compared to those in England. In Scotland, couples could marry with just the exchange of consent before witnesses, known as a "marriage by declaration." This made the process quicker, simpler, and less expensive than the more formal and costly ceremonies required in England (O’Connell L. 2019, 36-84). For this reason the family of Lydia Bennet supposed she and Mr. Wickham traveled there, even though they suspected even a worse scenario, that they do not intend to marry at all.

The legal age for marriage in Scotland was lower than in England, allowing younger couples to marry without parental consent. This was particularly appealing to couples facing opposition from their families or those seeking to marry against the wishes of their parents. The accessibility of Gretna Green from the major cities of England, such as London, also made it a convenient destination for eloping couples (Bailey 2015a, unpag.).

From the perspective of conventions, clandestine marriage was a very bold and rebellious act. Whoever of the eloping couple was in expectation of some fortune, especially from a wealthy relative, might be stripped of inheritance - this applied especially to men, who were about to marry a woman of lower rank, but might apply in the opposite direction as well (Bailey 2015a, unpag.). Judging from her consent to elope with Mr. Wickham, who, as reader already knows, is a very undeserving man, she had

no idea that he just lured her in. He apparently singled her out, because she was easy going and good-humoured, only as an entertaining companion for himself, without the intention to marry her (Austen 1994a, 146).

The notion of escaping societal constraints, parental disapproval, or financial constraints to follow their hearts and marry in a spontaneous and adventurous manner held a significant appeal, especially for those in love but facing obstacles to a traditional marriage. Overall, the combination of lenient marriage laws, lower age requirements, convenience, and the romantic allure of elopement made Gretna Green a popular choice for couples seeking to marry against the norms and conventions of Edwardian England.

### 3.2.1 Lydia Bennet and George Wickham

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the elopement and subsequent marriage of Lydia Bennet and George Wickham is a pivotal event that adds to the suspense and sets stakes high for the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. Jane and Elizabeth's suitors are put off by the improper behavior of their family members, with Lydia in the forefront. Lydia, the youngest and most flirtatious Bennet sister, becomes infatuated with the dashing and charming George Wickham, a militia officer stationed in the nearby town of Meryton, who by coincidence grew up at Pemberley. Lydia's naivety and impulsive nature lead her to engage in a clandestine relationship with him, her being completely oblivious to the fact that she is being misused. Their affair culminates in an elopement, where Wickham persuades Lydia to run away with him. Carefree Lydia does not comprehend the scope of her deeds and jeopardizes the reputation of her own family. Father Bennett and maternal uncle frantically search for the couple, fearing the worst - which is that the couple is actually not married and Lydia lives with a man out of wedlock (Austen 1994a, 198-245).

In *Pride and Prejudice* the horrors of the lost reputation is aptly described in the words of slightly melodramatic Mary upon the elopement of Lydia and Wickham: "Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson:—that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable, that one false step involves her in endless ruin, that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex" (Austen 1994a, 222).

Ultimately, the eloping couple is found. The marriage is hastily arranged, with Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet's brother using their connections and financial resources

to settle Wickham's debts and provide him with a stipend. The help of Mr. Darcy then serves as another reason for Elizabeth Bennet to change her mind about him. However, it is clear that Wickham's motives for marrying Lydia are far from pure, as he views the match as a means to financial security rather than genuine affection (Austen 1994a, 217).

Here the question of Lydia's morality and character comes into the game. It may very well be said that "sheltering" of young women, who were in many a case completely clueless about male advances and what they meant, might be very much at fault in this instance (Vranjes, V. 2014, 197-223). This is expressed in the following part of a letter by Jane to Elizabeth. "Though Lydia's short letter to Mrs. F. gave them to understand that they were going to Gretna Green, something was dropped by Denny expressing his belief that W. never intended to go there, or to marry Lydia at all, which was repeated to Colonel F., who, instantly taking the alarm, set off from B., intending to trace their route" (Austen 1994a, 134).

Lydia might spend her time with Wickham completely ignorant that she only became his mistress, who likely will later be abandoned. This worst-case scenario was prevented only by the family interference into the matter. But Lydia herself never for a moment doubted that she will become Mr. Wickham's wife, which makes her one degree less immoral by the contemporary standards, yet one degree or more - silly.



### 3.3 A Companionate Marriage: A Reward for Personal Growth

Jane Austen is often perceived as a brilliant moralist and her strong moral stance on many issues translates into the way she rewards the heroines, who keep their moral integrity and loyalty to their principles (Price 1975, 261). Judging by the journey of her characters - those who didn't put in the effort to act in unison with the principles of fairness, honesty and integrity, are punished with unhappy marriages. To name just a few, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, John Willoughby, Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet - they all used the easiest, most convenient route, resulting in a marriage that would, inevitably, turn out unsatisfactory. Austen never omits to describe the unfavorable outcome for the fickle, vain and calculating characters - both men and women.

John Willoughby married purely out of material considerations. Austen sees to it he reaps the reward for his conduct.

Willoughby could not hear of her (Marianne's) marriage without a pang; and his punishment was soon afterwards complete in the voluntary forgiveness of Mrs. Smith, who, by stating his marriage with a woman of character, as the source of her clemency, gave him reason for believing that had he behaved with honour towards Marianne, he might at once have been happy and rich. That his repentance of misconduct, which thus brought its own punishment, was sincere, need not be doubted;—nor that he long thought of Colonel Brandon with envy, and of Marianne with regret (Austen 1994a, 315).

Lydia let herself get seduced by George Wickham out of vanity and complete lack of sense. Austen sees the lack of reason on both sides and to the insult of extravagant lifestyle the couple was always displaying, she adds the injury of dwindling affections. "His (Wickham's) affection for her (Lydia) soon sunk into indifference: hers lasted a little longer; and, in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her" (Austen 1994a, 298).

Charlotte Lucas contented with a ridiculous man of pompous manners, whose initial attachment to her was clearly a work of the moment - a revenge to Elizabeth on his part. This is looked down upon by Austen as a marriage perhaps less despicable, but still arranged out of reasons contrary to her beliefs.

The relationship between Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* reflects the sensible approach to life and marriage advocated by Jane Austen. Elinor, characterized by her practicality, composure, and sense of responsibility, embodies the ideal of sensibility in the novel. Her relationship with Edward, while faced with challenges and obstacles, demonstrates a steadfast commitment to duty, integrity, and emotional maturity.

Elinor's sensible approach to life is evident in her handling of her feelings for Edward. Despite developing a deep affection for him, she remains composed and restrained, concealing her emotions to uphold propriety and protect her family's reputation. When faced with the shocking revelation of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy Steele, Elinor maintains her composure and handles the situation with grace and dignity. Her ability to navigate the complexities of love and social expectations reflects her censure and self-control.

Similarly, Edward Ferrars exemplifies the qualities of integrity and moral rectitude. Despite being bound by a prior engagement to Lucy Steele, Edward remains honorable and true to his feelings for Elinor. His sense of duty and responsibility towards his family, particularly his mother and sister, complicate his relationship with Elinor. However, Edward's sincerity and genuine affection for Elinor ultimately prevail, leading to their eventual union.

The development of Elinor and Edward's relationship underscores the sensible approach to marriage advocated by Austen. Their love is founded on mutual respect, understanding, and shared values rather than fleeting passion or impulsive decisions. Elinor's practicality and Edward's integrity create a stable foundation for their relationship, emphasizing the importance of emotional maturity and thoughtful consideration in matters of the heart.

In Austen's characters, there is a motif of intensely experiencing passionate emotional flares. Marianne was so genuinely and unrestrainedly in love that disappointment nearly brought her to the brink of death. She completely surrendered to the idea of marriage with Willoughby to the extent that her own life without him was unthinkable. However, she reassessed this, partly thanks to the love of her sisters and mother, because she had a quality emotional and affectionate background, which helped her realize that there are other important things in the world than just fateful love for a man.

The story of Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon illustrates the development of Marianne's view of love and marriage. While initially seeking passionate and romantic love in a relationship with the charismatic, romantic, emotional, and impulsive John Willoughby, she eventually finds a deeper and more mature form of love with the older, more stable, and more conscious Colonel Brandon. Their union emphasizes the importance of shared values, understanding, mutual support, and the decision for a good relationship. Austen's portrayal of the theme of age difference and levels of maturity in the relationship is very successful. Colonel Brandon is significantly older than Marianne, which was more common in that society. Colonel Brandon himself pointed out that he understands why Marianne might not be interested in him due to the age difference. This age difference is portrayed as an advantage, as Brandon's maturity and life experience provide the stability and understanding that Marianne needs.

Marianne Dashwood's marriage to Colonel Brandon at the end of *Sense and Sensibility* represents a significant development in her character and understanding of love. Initially, Marianne is characterized by her passionate and romantic nature, valuing sensibility and emotional intensity above all else. Her infatuation with the dashing John Willoughby embodies her idealized notions of love, which are shattered when Willoughby proves himself to be unreliable and unworthy of her affections.

Throughout the novel, Marianne undergoes a profound emotional journey that leads to her eventual appreciation of Colonel Brandon. Initially dismissing him as old, dull, and unromantic, Marianne fails to recognize the genuine kindness, sincerity, and depth of character that Colonel Brandon possesses. However, as she experiences the consequences of her impulsive actions and the depth of Colonel Brandon's unwavering devotion and care for her, Marianne begins to reassess her views on love and marriage.

Marianne's transformation is most evident during her illness at Cleveland, where she confronts her own mortality and the consequences of her reckless behavior. It is during this vulnerable period that she comes to appreciate Colonel Brandon's quiet strength, steadfastness, and genuine love for her. His unwavering support and concern for her well-being touch her heart, leading her to recognize the value of a love based on mutual respect, understanding, and shared values rather than fleeting passion.

By the end of the novel, Marianne's character has matured significantly. She learns to temper her romantic sensibilities with practicality and wisdom, understanding

the importance of emotional stability and constancy in a partner. Her marriage to Colonel Brandon signifies a newfound appreciation for the qualities of true love and the enduring virtues of a mature and committed relationship. The result of her transformation is summed up at the end of the novel:

Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another! ... Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting ... she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village (Austen 1994a, 320).

Probably the most iconic couple of the Austen's universe is Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth Bennet undergoes significant personal growth as she comes to recognize and confront her own prejudices towards Mr. Darcy. At the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth forms a strong negative opinion of Mr. Darcy based on several encounters. She sees him as arrogant, proud, and dismissive of those he considers beneath him. This initial prejudice is fueled by her observations of his behavior at the Meryton ball and his apparent involvement in separating Jane and Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth's prejudice is tested when she receives two conflicting accounts of Mr. Darcy's character. Her friend Charlotte Lucas praises Mr. Darcy's good qualities, highlighting his wealth, estate, and social standing. However, Elizabeth's sister Jane assures her that Mr. Darcy's reserved nature has misled Charlotte into thinking better of him than he deserves. Elizabeth's prejudice is further reinforced by Mr. Wickham's account of his mistreatment by Mr. Darcy. She readily believes Wickham's story of Darcy's unfair treatment and comes to see Mr. Darcy as even more disdainful and unworthy.

The turning point in Elizabeth's growth comes after she receives Darcy's letter explaining his side of the story regarding Wickham and Bingley's separation from Jane. This letter forces Elizabeth to reconsider her prejudices and reflect on her previous

judgments. She realizes that she has been too quick to judge Darcy without knowing the full truth. As the story progresses, Elizabeth starts noticing Darcy's actions and behavior more objectively. She sees him interact with his sister, Georgiana, with genuine care and concern. She also witnesses his efforts to assist Lydia after her elopement with Wickham, despite the risk to his own reputation.

By the time Elizabeth and Darcy meet again at Pemberley, Elizabeth has undergone a significant transformation. She is more open-minded and willing to see Darcy in a new light. The visit to Pemberley allows her to witness Darcy's kindness, generosity, and humility firsthand, contradicting her earlier prejudices. Ultimately, Elizabeth's personal growth culminates in her realization of her love for Mr. Darcy. She acknowledges her past prejudice and understands how it blinded her to Darcy's true character. In the end, she learns to set aside her initial judgments and embraces Darcy for the honorable, loving man he truly is. Through this journey, Elizabeth Bennet learns the importance of overcoming prejudices, the dangers of hasty judgments, and the value of seeing beyond appearances to recognize true worth. Her growth as a character is marked by her ability to confront her own biases and evolve into a more perceptive and compassionate individual.

### 3.4 The Development of the Concept of Marriage from Lizzie Bennet to Emma Woodhouse

As was presented in the previous chapter, Jane Austen crafted novels in which her main protagonists undergo significant personal growth leading to their eventual marriages. This applies both to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, but also to other Austen's books. All of Austen's heroines are facing major obstacles, yet they emerge in the end as characters of moral integrity. Elizabeth Bennet is forced to swallow the bitter pill of her own prejudices against Mr. Darcy, Marianne Dashwood has to completely change her outlook of what matters in the world. This makes Austen's work a masterpiece of moral philosophy, because without forcing her worldview on her readers, she forms their minds through the rapport of the reader with the characters in her novels. The reader is led to emphasize, reason for him/herself and conclude that moral integrity is superior to lowly mercenary motives or superfluous flirt.

The "reward" unions are depicted as being founded on respect, love, and mutual understanding. The heroines who undergo introspective journeys are rewarded with fulfilling marriages, as seen with characters like Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse. However, Austen also presents characters like Lydia, who serve as cautionary examples of the consequences of failing to seize opportunities for personal growth and maturity (Marsh 2023).

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen explores the theme of marriage as a business transaction through characters like Charlotte Lucas. Her pragmatic decision to marry Mr. Collins highlights the economic pressures faced by women of her time. Marriage of Lydia and Mr. Wickham is used to demonstrate how lack of morals and prudence leads in misery in marriage. The romantic union of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy challenges societal conventions by the blatant disregard for social propriety and status – Elizabeth Bennett comes from inferior ranks of society, and albeit she is the daughter of a country gentleman, her connections deem her unsuitable for a man of Darcy's nobility. Yet the marriage of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy presents the ultimate ideal of marriage to Austen, as it shows the potential for love and personal agency in marriage.

*Sense and Sensibility* delves into the consequences of hasty and ill-considered marriages, as seen through characters like John Willoughby. Austen dissects mercenary

motivations of some men and women, such as the person of cunning and calculating Lucy Steele. Through these depictions, Austen critiques the limited options available to women, the importance of financial stability in marriage, and the repercussions of marrying for love versus practicality. Overall, analyzing the marriage categories in Austen's novels provides a lens through which to examine the complex interplay of gender, social class, and personal agency in the Regency era, shedding light on the challenges and choices faced by women in pursuit of marital happiness and security.

In comparing *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, we observe differences in the portrayal of marriage, reflecting Jane Austen's evolving views on the subject. *Sense and Sensibility* explores love and marriage through the views of sisters Elinor and Marianne. Elinor embodies sense and restraint in matters of the heart. Her eventual marriage to Edward Ferrars is rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and a shared sense of responsibility. On the other hand, Marianne represents sensibility, passion and romantic ideals. Marianne's ill-fated infatuation with John Willoughby, who ultimately proves unworthy, leads to her heartbreak. She undergoes the difficult mental process of accepting her own folly and finally appreciates Colonel Brandon, who arrives to help her in the hour of need. The novel portrays marriage as a balance between sensibility and sense. The emphasis is laid on prudence, sincerity, and emotional compatibility of partners in marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen further refines her exploration of marriage. The Bennet sisters' quest for suitable marriages drives much of the plot, particularly Elizabeth Bennet's journey. Elizabeth's initial rejection of Mr. Darcy's proposal highlights her insistence on marrying for love and respect rather than social status. As the novel progresses, we witness a shift in Elizabeth's understanding of Darcy's character and motivations, leading to a realization of their emotional compatibility. Their eventual union signifies Austen's affirmation of marrying for love, personal integrity, and mutual understanding.

When considering the development of the concept of marriage from *Sense and Sensibility* to *Pride and Prejudice*, we can observe a maturation in Austen's portrayal. While *Sense and Sensibility* delves into the interplay between sensibility and sense, *Pride and Prejudice* emphasizes the importance of personal growth, self-awareness, and genuine emotional connection in marriage in a more rounded form.

Moving on to *Emma*, we encounter a different perspective on marriage through the character of Emma Woodhouse. As a wealthy and privileged young woman, Emma initially views marriage as an amusement and a means of entertainment, often meddling in others' romantic affairs. However, her experiences, particularly with the character of Mr. Knightley, lead her to a deeper understanding of the emotional and moral dimensions of marriage. Emma learns to prioritize genuine affection, respect, and shared values over superficial considerations. Her eventual union with Mr. Knightley signifies a maturation in her understanding of love and marriage, emphasizing the importance of emotional connection and mutual understanding in a lifelong partnership.

Upon reading novels in question, we can claim that Austen celebrates those characters of her story, who put in the effort to overcome inner struggle and emerge as morally strong people - such as Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and yes, even Marianne Dashwood. Overall, in the development of the concept of marriage from sisters Dashwood to Emma Woodhouse Austen explores and refines her own values. Through these characters' journeys, she challenges traditional notions of marriage based on wealth or status, advocating instead for marriages rooted in mutual respect, genuine affection, and emotional compatibility.

This chapter attempted to analyze the different courtship categories in Austen's books on the example of specific couples and attempt to construct basic categories that often appear in Austen's books, such as marriage out of mercenary motives, marriage and elopement etc. The question remains to be answered, whether there can be traced some views that through the lens of present-day scholarship are considered (proto)feminist. It could be argued that pinpointing the feminist aspect might be just the effort to dissect just one part of the moral message of Austen's books that present a well-rounded and complex ethical universe where personal growth of the hero or heroine is rewarded with the ultimate ideal - the companionate marriage. Although we can observe certain maturation in the concept of marriage in Austen's books, the underlying message remains the same. Humans – women and men alike deserve to get their reward in life according to their efforts.



## Conclusion

Jane Austen's novels often center around marriage, allowing her to delve into interpersonal relationships, cater to her predominantly female readers, develop characters, and explore the ideal form of marriage. Austen's literary work keeps strictly within the confines set for women of her time and class. She was called a miniaturist, because she succeeded to capture minute detail of the life of her class, but scarcely ventured outside of it. She never directly mentioned politics and political events, wars, or social issues. She herself acknowledged that there are many other realms of literary endeavors worthy of pursuing, but she kept to the one subject she knew best and felt best qualified to write about - the subjects of daily life, with very little drama going on in the first plan.

The novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, with marriage as their central theme, offer insights into women's lives through the portrayal of marital unions and the journey towards them. The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to explore how these two novels handle the subject of marriage, courtship, traditional gender roles, and the conflict between emotions and reason in the strive for the ideal marriage. Austen uses the diversity of marital motives (love, money, property, social status) to illustrate the complexity of interpersonal relationships and social constraints of her time. She also shows how these motives affect the long-term felicity and stability of marriages.

For many of Austen's contemporaries, material considerations were crucial in seeking a spouse. Austen portrays the difficulties faced by those disadvantaged by inheritance laws, highlighting the immorality of marrying for money, as shown by characters like Mr. Wickham and Mr. Willoughby. She also depicts the covert practices some women used to secure advantageous marriages. Elopement and clandestine marriage were prevalent issues in Austen's time, as shown in her novels through instances like George Wickham's planned elopement and his later marriage to Lydia Bennet. These situations illustrate the contemporary challenges, especially regarding parental consent.

Austen's works have a very nuanced moralist undertone. Her works can be seen through the prism of entertainment, but also as guides to a life of moral integrity and personal fortitude. Austen rewards characters who maintain moral integrity and loyalty and stray away from superfluous flirt, falling for beauty without other considerations or mercenary motives. Those who fail to do so, such as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, John Willoughby, Charlotte Lucas, and Lydia Bennet, face unsatisfactory unions. Austen teaches her readers that there

is no felicity in marriage, if partners are not equal to one another in disposition and compatible in terms of character, intelligence and values. From today's perspective it does not sound like much, but from the perspective of the late 18th and early 19th century this is a remarkable shift of paradigm. Throughout her novels, Austen's main protagonists undergo significant personal growth leading to marriages based on respect, love, and understanding. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse experience fulfilling unions as a result of their introspective journeys. However, Austen also uses characters like Lydia as cautionary examples of the consequences of lacking personal growth and maturity.

Austen's forte lies in her incredibly accurate portrayal of people, their characters, motivations and idiosyncrasies. What is more, she adeptly illustrates the motives and assumptions behind marriages in her time, which was of special interest to this thesis. Most connoisseurs of Austen's work would agree that albeit Austen wasn't a feminist per se, she definitely departed from the tradition of passive women and tried to pave the path for women towards more agency and a happier future.

Austen taught generations that only through personal growth, integrity and morality a good marriage can be achieved. Her well-developed characters therefore encouraged new ways of thinking in society, especially what the expectations of women in marriage should be and how women should behave to "earn it". Austen's heroines often undergo profound personal development, going through an ordeal of mental anguish and inner torment before they are rewarded for their integrity by "living happily ever after".

Austen's critical views of present society admittedly deal with the question of women's rights, but Austen pictures other problems of the time with as much conviction. In this respect, both points can be equally and successfully argued - Austen is a proto-feminist, because she deals with the life and life challenges of women, making observations about patriarchal orders and arguing for the equality between man and a woman in a couple. But at the same time, it could be as well claimed that she is in the first place a moralist who feels just as keenly for other beings who were affected by the injustice of the obsolete laws and standards of the day. Hers is inherently moralist view, which is, however, wrapped up in entertaining stories with a soothing happy end. The question whether Austen was a proto-feminist or not will undoubtedly flourish in the future.

## **AI Tools**

The AI tools used are Grammarly and DeepL translator.

<https://www.deepl.com/translator>

<https://www.grammarly.com/>

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