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Romance or business: Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (1). Jane Austen begins *Pride and Prejudice* with a frank statement of business that seems to immediately contradict any notion of romance. Only by examining several factors, including characterization, plot, and language, is it possible to understand that Austen means her opening as an ironic comment instead of a statement of fact.

Early nineteenth century upper class women in Britain were expected to marry. If the woman was poor and titled, a marriage could bring economic security. If wealthy but untitled, marriage was a way to raise the social standing not only of the bride, but her family. In reality, marriage was less a relationship than an “economic transaction” (Pool 181).

In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet was the second of five daughters born to a titleless and relatively poor family. Her father owns a small estate, not enough to provide sufficient dowry for all his daughters. Neither plain nor pretty, Elizabeth was blessed with intelligence and wit, as her father acknowledged: “Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (2). When the story opens, Elizabeth was not actively looking for a husband for herself; she is more concerned about her older sister, Jane. At a dance, Elizabeth is rejected by a wealthy man, Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth’s own first impressions of Mr. Darcy are equally negative: “Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings towards him” (11). And yet halfway through the story, Mr. Darcy reverses his feelings and proposes to Elizabeth Bennet; he is shocked that

she when she refuses his offer (180). Elizabeth, having rejected Mr. Darcy and his fortune, finds herself attracted when she discovers another side of his character, and at the end declares to her father, "I do, I do like him...I love him" (344). In the end, Elizabeth married Mr. Darcy, the relationship based on love and not property or social standing.

Austen's story emphasizes the commercial value of marriage. For example, Elizabeth's mother was pleased when the heir to the family's estate, Mr. Collins, proposed marriage; Elizabeth's refusal to marry him enraged her mother. Elizabeth's friend Charlotte immediately accepted Mr. Collins' proposal (Austen 106-113). "The utility of the marriage is further emphasized when it becomes clear that the two are not seriously interested in each other" (Garbitelli and Kries). For Charlotte, marriage meant economic stability, not love, and Elizabeth's mother agreed:

Not yet, however, in spite of her disappointment in her husband, did Mrs. Bennet give up the point. She talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns. She endeavoured to secure Jane in her interest but Jane with all possible mildness declined interfering;—and Elizabeth, sometimes with real earnestness and sometimes with playful gaiety, replied to her attacks. Though her manner varied, however, her determination never did. (111)

The irony of the beginning of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship, especially the dialogue (Brower 71), was the reflection of the era's expectations for women. Austen had little sympathy with the common view, that women were property. Her heroines used language that emphasize their independence (Byrne). Ahead of her time, Jane Austen makes the case for marriage based on love.

Works Cited

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