



Contrasting Attitudes Toward Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*: Elizabeth Bennet's Disregard for the Contemporary Marital Conventions

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Abstract

Through a liberal feminist perspective, this essay investigates the unconventional marital views of the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet. These are analyzed and compared to the traditional marital opinions of the novel's social environment. Moreover, the historical context is important in understanding the marital views in *Pride and Prejudice*, because the novel was written at a time when the views toward marriage changed significantly. This paper argues that Elizabeth's behavior, expressed opinions and rejections of Mr. Collins's and Mr. Darcy's proposals depict liberal feminist ideas of marriage. The literary review supports the notion that there are two contrasting attitudes toward marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*: the traditional view and the liberal feminist view. The thorough examination of Elizabeth Bennet's character strongly suggests that she represents the unconventional view of marriage, while characters such as Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet, and Charlotte Lucas voice the traditional view of marriage. Furthermore, an analysis of Mr. Darcy's attraction toward Elizabeth indicates that it was Elizabeth's very unconventionality that made Mr. Darcy fall in love with her.

Key words

marital views, marriage, conventions, social status, *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, 18th century, 19th century, feminism, old historicism, liberalism

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There is much debate regarding how marriage is portrayed in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Some critics have pointed out that the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet has been recognized as a liberated heroine of the novel published in 1813, which was a time of traditionalist values (Siddika, 425, Kirkham, 91, Campbell, 65). One of the advocates of this idea, Mahmuda Khaton Siddika, bases this notion on the fact that Elizabeth establishes an independent self in a male-oriented community, and an “archetypal ... female world” (425). Other critics claim that the novel has a significant “political and economic dimension” in terms of Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship and that “the marriage[s] in [the novel are] not the result of love, but the result of economic needs” (Devika, 3, Fu et. al., 148). The present essay argues that by examining Elizabeth Bennet's personality, domestic and public behavior and her rejection of Mr. Collins's proposal as well as Mr. Darcy's initial proposal, it can be established that Elizabeth is portrayed as expressing liberal feminist ideas of marriage. She believes that affection, friendship and respect are major elements of a happy and strong marriage; she rejects the notion that one should marry for wealth or social status. With regard to Elizabeth's unconventional marital views, this essay examines the consequences for her as a character and what her example would have meant to contemporary female readers. It is crucial to consider the historical context of the novel because the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries witnessed a number of important changes in the view of the institution of marriage. From a liberal feminist point of view, Elizabeth establishes herself as an independent and strong-willed heroine when she demonstrates her untraditional view of what marriage represents.

The ideologies of liberalism and feminism are fundamental parts of this essay, and so they should be defined. Dictionary.com defines “liberalism” as an idea that allows “freedom from tradition and authority”, while “feminism” is defined as “the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men.” (n. pag.). Liberal feminism combines these two concepts. Amy R. Baehr writes that there are different subcategories of liberal feminism (n.pag.). In this paper, the philosophical notion of liberal feminism will be used. It emphasizes that freedom is viewed primarily as personal autonomy, which means that each individual has the right to make their own decisions, and live life as they themselves choose (Baehr, n.pag.). The philosophical idea of freedom is related to self-governance, which is based on that one has the right of “being co-author of the conditions under which one lives” (Baehr, n.pag.). Elizabeth Bennet voices the philosophical idea of liberal feminism by arguing that she has the right to choose her own marriage partner: marriage is a personal and lifelong

commitment between two individuals. By defying the marital norms of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and rejecting the proposals from Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth does not only express liberal feminist ideas but she also acts on them. She chooses to go her own way and make her own decisions, thus establishing a very strong and independent character.

A short consideration of the contemporary reviews of *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates how literary critics perceived Elizabeth's untraditional view of marriage. Anthony Mandal (52) writes that the novel was reviewed by three contemporary journals: *The British Critic*, *The Critical Review* and *The New Review*. The reviewers for all three journals considered the character of Elizabeth to be “perfectly executed”, suggesting that they accepted her independent personality and unconventional marital views (Mandal, 52). *The British Critic* argued that the novel was “very far superior to almost all the publications of the kind which have come before us ... the story is well told, the characters remarkably well drawn and supported, and written with great spirit as well as vigour” (Mandal, 52). Richard Baldwin, who wrote the review for the journal *The Critical Review* states that “[the novel] rises very superior to any novel we have lately met with in the delineation of domestic scenes.” (324). Furthermore, he writes that “Elizabeth ... is represented as combining quickness of perception and strength of mind, with a playful vivacity ... joined with a handsome person.” (319, 320). Baldwin asserts the independence of Elizabeth Bennet, stressing that she has “strength of mind” and a “playful vivacity”. Thus, he provides a positive view of Elizabeth's strong and independent personality. However, as will be shown, Baldwin's positive perception of Elizabeth's character differ greatly with the views held by contemporary readers with traditional marital beliefs. Elizabeth's marital views would be considered highly unorthodox by families that followed the marital norms of the time.

On one occasion, when Elizabeth sees Jane and Bingley together, the narrator observes “[Elizabeth] saw ... in idea [how Jane was] settled in [Bingley's] house, in all the felicity which a marriage of true affection could bestow” (Austen, 99). Elizabeth does not reflect over the fact that she expresses an unconventional marital view through wishing Jane a marriage based on “true affection”. It suggests that Elizabeth's own view of marriage is so evidently logical herself, while it is highly inappropriate and irrational to traditionalists such as the fictional character Mr. Collins.

It has been suggested that through the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet and the narrator, Jane Austen illustrates her own view of what she thought marriage should be based on, namely liberal feminist values such as respect and esteem (Sturrock, 23). However, as Emily Auerbach

writes, “[Unlike the lives of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*] Jane Austen's life was indeed 'barren of events' [and she] never married or had children” (28). Austen lived a quiet life, and so her portrayal of Elizabeth's marital views demonstrates a very bold and clear statement in comparison. Considering that Austen never married, her declaration of Elizabeth's marital values is very well-defined.

Austen's portrayal of Elizabeth's views on marriage introduced contemporary readers to a new, more progressive perspective on the institution. Hazel Jones writes that “Austen became an increasingly critical observer of the marriages which came to her notice. She recognized that affection, friendship and respect were fundamental elements of any workable relationship” (5). Austen wrote about the world she knew, and her controversial ideas of marriage became infused into her literary works through characters such as Elizabeth Bennet. Jones further states that “No Austen heroine marries for money: affection is always part of the equation” (5). The fact that affection is a recurring theme among Austen's characters supports the notion that Austen herself had a liberal feminist view of marriage.

Austen's notions on marriage, represented by the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet, have been frequently discussed in relation to Mary Wollstonecraft's beliefs. Lloyd W. Brown, for example, writes in his 1973 article “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition”, that Austen's marital beliefs are best understood by examining her skeptical views toward the “male definitions of female emotions, sexuality, education and modesty” (336). Moreover, he argues that Wollstonecraft's feminism “questioned [these] masculine assumptions in society” (324). Austen's ideas compare to Wollstonecraft's ideas in the perspective that both authors question “the conventional assumptions about marriage, insofar as those assumptions are rooted in [a] woman's identity” (336). They criticize the conventional idea that a woman is expected to marry because marriage is “rooted in [her] identity”, while they encourage liberal feminist values to be part of marriage. Lucy Sheehan considers the connection between Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Bennet, and writes that “[Elizabeth has an] independence [that] reflects a Wollstonecraftian conception of gender politics” (xxxiii). Consequently, Elizabeth expresses values advocated by both Austen and Wollstonecraft.

Mary Wollstonecraft is considered to be one of the earliest liberal feminists (Cannon, Crowcroft (ed.), 966). Her text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, asserts women's equality to men (Cannon, Crowcroft (ed.), 966). As already established, Wollstonecraft questions the contemporary ideas of marriage, which according to Mary Evans involve that women should be financially dependent on men (50). Wollstonecraft

acknowledges that marriage was the only way through which females could reach a higher social status in society: “[women sacrifice] strength of body and mind ... to the desire of establishing themselves, - the only way women can rise in the world, - by marriage” (74). However, Wollstonecraft wanted marriage to incorporate values such as “equality, free choice, reason, mutual esteem and a profound concern” (Abbey, 79). Ruth Abbey states that “To recast marriage in this way means that Wollstonecraft is applying liberal values to the world of romantic love and family life” (79). Wollstonecraft argues that a woman can be married and still achieve independence, which was controversial in 18th century England. Austen's fictional character Elizabeth Bennet complies with this concept because she wants independence in marriage. She refuses to be oppressed by the conventional idea that one should marry in order to achieve wealth or social status, only to be restrained in independence during marriage. A traditionalist character such as Mr. Collins would find that idea absurd, because he wants to have complete control over his wife.

Critics such as Margeret Kirkham and Lloyd Brown argue that Austen read Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (ix-x, 327-328). This is due to Austen's strong depictions of liberal feminist heroines like Elizabeth Bennet. Austen and Wollstonecraft lived during the same time, and as Brown noted earlier, both women advocated a more progressive and unconventional view of marriage. They did it in a time when such marital views were considered controversial, and their notions of marriage demonstrate noteworthy similarities. As already established, Austen considered affection, friendship and respect to be major values of marriage. Wollstonecraft found the corresponding values of profound concern, mutual esteem and free choice to be important. These values are linked, because all can be connected to the idea of liberal feminism discussed by Baehr (n.pag.). The fictional character Elizabeth Bennet's want to enter a marriage based on liberal feminist values like affection and equality, supports the idea that she embodies radical and unconventional ideas as expressed by both Austen and Wollstonecraft. Regarding the contemporary reception of the character Elizabeth, Susannah Fullerton notes that “some contemporary readers found her too 'novel' a creation. She was a highly unconventional, new sort of heroine, and it is easy for modern readers to underestimate just how astonishing she was for readers at the time.” (56). Fullerton's observation suggests that contemporary readers saw Elizabeth as a disrespectful and controversial character due to her independent personality and liberal feminist views of marriage.

It can thus be seen that the contemporary reviews of the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet were positive, that there are similarities between Austen and Wollstonecraft's liberal feminist

ideas of marriage, and that these beliefs are represented by Elizabeth. As already established, the philosophical notion of liberal feminism emphasizes the importance of individual freedom. Consequently, it criticizes female subordination, which limits freedom for women (Tong, 2). In this context, female subordination is discussed in relation to parentally arranged marriages. Female subordination is practiced by some characters in the novel, such as Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, when they try to influence others in their choice of marital partners (Austen, 111-114, 356). As Rosemarie Tong notes, "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints" (2). 18th century women received the power of deciding whether a suitor was an acceptable marital partner or not. Such was the case, at least in theory. In reality, there existed an element of female subordination in relation to the question of marriage. Marital norms of the time emphasized that a woman should choose the most socially respected and wealthy male as a marital partner. Thus, she could be influenced by family members, who encouraged her to choose the most successful male (Maurer, n.pag., Swords, n.pag.). When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins's proposal, Mrs. Bennet tries to subdue Elizabeth by saying that she will not talk to her again. She finds no pleasure in talking to "undutiful children" (Austen, 108, 109, 114). This suggests that Mrs. Bennet considers it Elizabeth's duty to marry the socially accepted Mr. Collins. It correlates with the traditional view of marriage discussed above, i.e. that one should marry for social status and wealth (Maurer, n.pag.).

Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to accept Mr. Collins's proposal would be highly inappropriate in the later half of the 18th century. "Virtually everyone" were expected to marry, because it made it possible to achieve higher social status in society (Campbell, 65). As noted by Jones, Austen became a critical observer of contemporary marital attitudes, and her observations convinced her that affection, friendship and respect are crucial values of a strong marriage (5). Barbara Swords writes in her essay "Woman's Place' in Jane Austen's England" that "marriage had [traditionally] been regarded as an alliance between families, as a pairing on the basis of wealth or birth, or as an arrangement made by parents without regard to the personal preferences of the young woman and the young man" (n.pag.). As argued by Holly Brewer, *Pride and Prejudice* criticizes arranged marriages (336). This idea supports the notion that Austen did not advocate arranged marriages, as well as that she portrays Elizabeth as a person whose beliefs contrast with the traditional marital principles of the 18th century.

The established marital traditions of the 18th century stressed that achieving higher social status in society was important, suitability of the partner was crucial and that wives should be financially dependent on their husbands (Maurer, n.pag., Sheehan, xxxii). As already

suggested, Austen's observation of such traditional marriages encouraged her to use her writing to illustrate her unconventional idea of marriage. Thus, Elizabeth rejects choosing a partner according to the accepted principles. She declines the initial proposal from Mr. Darcy, saying that due to his manners “[he] would be the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed to marry” (Austen, 195). This indicates that Elizabeth does not consider his wealth or social status when she refuses his proposal. She tells him that “your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your self-disdain of the feelings of others” (Austen, 195). Nouns such as “arrogance” and “conceit” suggest that Elizabeth refuses Mr. Darcy based on her impression that he has an ill-mannered character.

While the fictional Elizabeth Bennet rejects the idea that one should marry for the sake of achieving social status and wealth, many 18th century women of the upper social classes believed that their only chance to accomplish anything at all in life was by marrying well (Swords, n.pag.). As noted by Maurer and Sheehan, married women were completely dependent on their husbands, which limited their freedom (Maurer, n.pag., Sheehan, xxxii). However, it is important to note that adolescent females received a level of independence after completing domestic training. They were usually not responsible for their own households or raising children. Thus, these females were relatively liberated, which in this context means that they “had more freedom during [late adolescence] than they would ever have again” (Maurer, n.pag.). A parallel can be drawn between this discussion and the fictional character Elizabeth, who was domestically trained by her parents (Austen, 167). She is depicted as a late adolescent female because she is “not one and twenty” (Austen, 168). These facts, in addition to her taking part in various social events throughout the novel, suggest that she experiences the freedom described above. As will be demonstrated, she is not willing to give up that freedom for a marriage that will inhibit her personality.

It has been noted that 18th century society encouraged conservative marital values, and that such conventional marital principles are represented through Austen's fictional characters Mrs. Bennet and Catherine de Bourgh. Swords argues that the views of marriage changed considerably at the end of the 18th century. To be in love with one's spouse became important because “Marriage was [an] intimate, happy companionship” (Swords, n.pag.). This idea brings the discussion into the 19th century. It is important to discuss both the late 18th and early 19th century marital norms, because Jane Austen grew up and wrote *Pride and Prejudice* in the second half of the 18th century but did not publish it until the beginning of the 19th century (Kirkham, 54, 91). While characters such as Mrs. Bennet and Catherine de Bourgh voice the

traditional 18th century marital beliefs, this new 19th century idea of marriage correlates well with the fictional character Elizabeth Bennet's notion of marriage. Thus, Austen depicts two very contrasting views of marriage: one traditional and one liberal feminist view. As already noted by Mandal, contemporary literary critics reviewed Elizabeth's character favorably (52). Nevertheless, Fullerton's discussion about the general reception of Elizabeth Bennet strongly suggests that Jane Austen's unconventional depiction of marriage irritated some traditionalists. However, the essence of Austen's marital ideas were partly realized in the 19th century when females began to acknowledge to themselves that they wanted an affectionate marriage.

In 19th century England, putting too much focus on finding a marital partner was considered inappropriate. It was believed that if a female was too straightforward with her motives in the company of men, it would increase her sexual appetite (Hughes, n.pag.). This notion contrasts with the novel and the 18th century marital norms that it depicts through the characters Mrs. Bennet and Catherine de Bourgh; that marriage had the clear aim of securing social status and wealth. In the 19th century, the discussion of sexuality became a more prominent feature of society (Weeks, 34). Kathryn Hughes examines this matter in relation to the contemporary assumptions of female sexuality, and notes that “Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction.” (n.pag.). A woman was to enter into marriage and then bring a number of children into the world. Female sexual desires and emotions were still considered controversial in the marital context. Joan Perkin writes that “Women [themselves] had a clear idea of what they hoped to achieve in marriage (whatever reality followed) They wanted affection and companionship, even if they thought romantic love was not likely to last” (29). Some unmarried females longed for a marriage based on affection even though they doubted whether romantic love could sustain a marriage. Furthermore, they knew that the concept of romantic love was still controversial in the eyes of traditionalists. Still, the old marital traditions were challenged by this new 19th century belief held by the fictional Elizabeth as well as by many young women in 19th century England.

Hui-Chun Chang states that “Elizabeth’s feminist views boldly challenge [the recognized] societal rules and reinforce her independence.” (78). Thus, Austen questioned advocates of the old marital norms by portraying Elizabeth as a young and self-reliant woman who believes in marriage as a union based on affection, friendship and respect. Furthermore, Chang notes that “[When Elizabeth asserts] her independence from the expected female behavior in ... society, [she] rejects [the] display of conventional values” (80). When Elizabeth chooses to go her own

way, she rejects to comply with what is generally expected by a female. A female should be obedient and seek to acquire wealth and status through a loveless marriage. Elizabeth refuses to abide by that notion when she declines Mr. Collins's proposal, hence disregarding her mother's wish.

Elizabeth Bennet is dependent on her parents because she is not yet married and still lives in the parental home. However, being an unmarried woman in 19th century England was generally “a fate to be avoided like the plague” (Perkin, 3). Nevertheless, a single female had the same property rights, law protection and tax payment obligations as a man (Perkin, 11). Marriage was preferred to the single state because “for most women, marriage meant release from a childlike and humiliating dependence on the parental home” (Perkin, 3). 19th century women believed marriage to be a means to escape the parental home and acquire a household of their own. In that respect, they considered themselves to have achieved independence through marriage, even if they were financially dependent on their husband. Elizabeth is still dependent on her parents, however, she declares her independence in other ways. Sheehan states that “Elizabeth is not financially independent, and in fact depends upon an advantageous marriage for her future survival. Yet throughout the novel, she asserts an intellectual and moral independence” (xxxii). Her independent character is reinforced by her refusal to accept the proposals from Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy. Social status and wealth are not what matters to her. Such values are generally conceived as trivial and shallow, and her independence and character go beyond that.

As already noted, the novel provides two depictions of the meaning of marriage. One traditionalist view represented by characters such as Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins, and one liberal feminist view represented by Elizabeth Bennet. Moreover, as is widely known, marriage is declared to be one of the major themes of *Pride and Prejudice* already in the first lines of the novel: “It's a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” (Austen, 3). Placing such a statement at the very beginning of the novel indicates that marriage is of great significance in the fictional environment that Austen portrays. Furthermore, it can be suggested that Austen demonstrates the traditional 18th century view of marriage in these initial lines. The very bold expression in the first sentence, “a truth universally acknowledged”, puts emphasis on two major notions. Firstly, that all single men with “good fortune” are assumed to be in search for potential marital partners, thereby encouraging single females to search for such wealthy, single males. Secondly, the opening lines highlight the importance of acquiring an advantageous marriage. Consequently, it can be

suggested that the initial lines of the novel depict the “universally acknowledged”, traditional marital values.

Chang notes that “It is clear from the start of *Pride and Prejudice* that Austen is mindful [regarding the] societal conditions [of her] characters [and especially the] autonomy that economic independence grants to men and the dependency that is expected of women” (77). Hence, the initial lines of the novel imply that economic independence is granted to male characters, and female characters are expected to search for such economically independent males in order to survive financially. This notion correlates with the traditional 18th century idea that families sought to acquire greater social status and money for their female children by involving them in arranged marriages, thus establishing them as financially dependent (Maurer, n.pag.). As noted by such critics as Evans and Sheehan, Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen opposed that idea and questioned it through their writing (50, xxxiii). As already suggested, the notion that Austen disagreed with this contemporary belief becomes apparent through looking at her portrayal of Elizabeth. Elizabeth wants to marry, however, she does not want to marry a man based on that he has “good fortune” and social capital. Thus, she does not want to enter an arranged marriage with Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennet tries to force her into marrying Mr. Collins, but Elizabeth is determined in not being suppressed by her mother's traditional view of marriage.

Mr. Collins disregards Elizabeth's rejection of his proposal because he tells her that “When I do [speak] to you next on this subject I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer” (Austen, 108). He is insistent, because he states that he hopes to receive “a more favourable answer” next time they discuss the subject. It implies that he is confident in receiving a positive answer from Elizabeth eventually, as he assumes they will return to the subject at a later time. Mr. Collins adheres to a very traditionalist marital view because he is so persistent in receiving a positive answer. This argument is strengthened by that he bases his proposal of marriage on the idea that he can give Elizabeth an acceptable home, and provide her with good social connections: “It does not appear to me ... that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections ... and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in its favor” (Austen, 109). Mr. Collins has tried to convince her to accept him by asking her to do what is socially expected of her, without any success. Hence, he believes he can convince her by arguing that he has the money and connections she needs. Mr. Collins's belief that he can provide her with “a [highly desirable] establishment [and] connections”, indicates that he is materialistic and unfeeling. While he

bases his decision on matters that is generally considered as superficial, Elizabeth does not consider these factors. She considers her feelings, and is resolute in her decision, stating that:

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. (Austen, 109)

Mr. Collins is ignorant because he belittles Elizabeth's unconventional character and rejection of his proposal of marriage. However, Elizabeth yields neither to his ignorance nor insistence. When she explains to the marital traditionalist Mr. Collins that it is “absolutely impossible” for her to accept him, she emphasizes that there is no likelihood they will ever marry, declaring that her feelings “in every respect forbid” her to say yes. Elizabeth's own feelings hinder her to accept his proposal, because that would go against the unconventional marital values that she believes in. As already suggested by Fullerton, contemporary readers viewed Elizabeth as a controversial character (56). Elizabeth's answer on Mr. Collins's proposal strengthens this notion, because the reasons for her decision conflict with the contemporary belief that feelings do not belong in marriage. She uses a very straightforward and strong language, with expressions such as “absolutely impossible” and “every respect”. Moreover, she asks Mr. Collins if she can “speak plainer” in order for him to understand that she would never accept him. Her use of this expression indicates that she thinks Mr. Collins is indifferent to her answer on his proposal. The notion that Mr. Collins is highly ignorant of Elizabeth's answer becomes increasingly apparent when he states that “it [is an] established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application” and that “I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection” (Austen, 109). Mr. Collins thinks that rejecting an initial proposal from a male is an “established custom” among females. That statement suggests that he thinks Elizabeth is a follower of conventional marital norms, when her unconventional character and marital opinions establish that she is not.

Mr. Collins's refusal to accept Elizabeth's answer relates to the idea brought up by Brown earlier, namely that marriage was traditionally considered part of a woman's identity (336). Mr. Collins voices this concept when he states that “[rejecting a man's proposal] would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character” (Austen, 109). He uses the definite noun “the female character”, which suggests that he considers all female characters to be

similar intellectually. He establishes that there is a “universal female character” which he relates to the “traditional custom” he mentioned earlier, that all females are bound to reject a male on his first proposal. It implies that Mr. Collins thinks all females are bound to marry because all females possess the same identity. However, Elizabeth declares to Mr. Collins that she has an independent nature, thus disproving Mr. Collins's idea of an “universal female character”: “Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (Austen, 109). As noted by Brown earlier, Austen questioned the contemporary marital values through criticizing and writing about, for example, the preconceptions that males had regarding female emotions (Brown, 336). Based on that notion, it can be suggested that Mr. Collins dismisses Elizabeth's answer because it is an emotional response. In other words, he does not understand her answer because he is a marital traditionalist. The conventional marital norms he complies with do not allow feelings to govern matters such as a marriage proposal. Elizabeth asserts her independence and capability to make her own decisions through stating that she is a “rational creature”. It indicates that Elizabeth is conscious of Mr. Collins's stereotypical view of female emotions. However, she asks him to view her as a rational human being, although her decision is based on her feelings.

Mr. Collins communicates his discussion with Elizabeth to Mrs. Bennet. As a fellow marital traditionalist, Mrs. Bennet excuses Elizabeth's independent character: “depend upon it, Mr. Collins, ... that [Elizabeth] shall be brought to reason. ... She is a very headstrong foolish girl” (Austen, 111). Mrs. Bennet states that Elizabeth will be “brought to reason”. With regard to Mrs. Bennet's traditionalist marital attitude, her statement suggests that she aims to make Elizabeth aware of what she has declined, which is a marriage of social status and financial security. Moreover, Mrs. Bennet's discussion with Mr. Collins indicates that she is aware of that Elizabeth has liberal feminist marital views, but she does not define Elizabeth's character as liberal feminist. Instead, Mrs. Bennet describes her personality as “headstrong” and “foolish”, which strongly indicates that Mrs. Bennet does not have a positive attitude toward Elizabeth's character. Mrs. Bennet goes on, stating that “[Elizabeth] does not know her own interest; but I will make her know it.” (Austen, 111). In the first part of this statement, Mrs. Bennet implies that she has more knowledge about Elizabeth's interests than Elizabeth herself does. Hence, Mrs. Bennet declares that Elizabeth's feelings and interests are of no importance. Mrs. Bennet's attitude tells the reader something about the customs of the novel's social environment, namely that it is acceptable to take control over and be dictatorial toward one's

own daughter's decisions and way of living life. The second part of Mrs. Bennet's statement has almost an aggressive tone: "will make her know it" implies that Mrs. Bennet will force her own opinions onto Elizabeth, thus making her change her mind with respect to Mr. Collins's proposal.

Mr. Collins answers Mrs. Bennet: "if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state." (Austen, 111). Mr. Collins states that such a "headstrong and foolish" character would not be a suitable wife to a man in his situation. Consequently, he wishes for his future partner to be a marital traditionalist just like he is. He wants a wife with an obedient and rational character. Furthermore, he argues that an independent marital partner would not lead to any happiness in marriage. Mr. Collins claims that he looks for "happiness in the marriage state", however it can be suggested that his definition of marital happiness is based on that his partner is completely dependent on him. He finds Elizabeth's independent personality unsuitable to his own marital traditionalist character, and so he doubts whether they would constitute a good couple.

He continues his very rational and marital traditionalist reasoning when he says that "If therefore she actually persists in rejecting my suit, perhaps it were better not to force her into accepting me, because if liable to such defects of temper, she could not contribute much to my felicity." (Austen, 111). Mr. Collins tells Mrs. Bennet that if Elizabeth continues to reject his proposal, there is no reason to *force* her into accepting him. His use of the word "force" depicts a very cruel reality for women who refused to marry the marital prospect their families wanted them to marry. The notion that Mr. Collins has no reaction toward the fact that he uses this violent word implies that he voices a common marital custom of Austen's time. His attitude correlates with the earlier discussed 18th century marital idea that some women were influenced into choosing the most socially acceptable and financially prosperous marital partner (Maurer, n.pag.). In addition, Mr. Collins's use of the word "force" relates to the idea discussed by Barbara Swords, namely that a male and a female could be *forced* into marriage by their respective families (n.pag.). Mr. Collins labels Elizabeth's independent character as "a defect of temper", and argues that a marital partner with such a disposition would not contribute much to his own happiness. It supports the idea that he would not find any pleasure in being married to a woman who is not entirely dependent on him.

As already established, Mrs. Bennet told Mr. Collins she would make Elizabeth "know her own interest". This occurs some time after her discussion with Mr. Collins. She applies an

attitude of dissatisfaction and disappointment when talking to Elizabeth:

'Aye, there she comes, ... looking as unconcerned as may be, and caring no more for us than if we were at York, provided she can have her own way. -- But I tell you what, [Elizabeth], if you [are] to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all.' (Austen, 114)

Mrs. Bennet expresses her thoughts about Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins in a complaining manner. Expressions such as “there she comes”, “looking ... unconcerned” and “caring no more for us” indicate that Mrs. Bennet tries to make Elizabeth feel guilty about rejecting Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennet indirectly states that Elizabeth is selfish through the expression “provided she can have her own way”. It implies that she believes Elizabeth only thinks about herself, and not the social and financial well-being of the whole family. This strengthens the idea that Mrs. Bennet does not approve of Elizabeth's unconventional character and marital opinions. Mrs. Bennet continues her accusatory attitude, stating that

I ... do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. -- *I shall not be able to keep you -- and so I warn you. -- I have done with you from this very day. ... I should never speak to you again, ... I have no pleasure in talking to undutiful children* (Austen, 114)

Mrs. Bennet puts great emphasis on the importance of marriage when she states that “when your father is dead [I] shall not be able to keep you [at home]”. This indicates that if Elizabeth is still single when her father is dead, Elizabeth will have nowhere to live. Mrs. Bennet will neglect her and force her to move out of the family house. Mrs. Bennet's reasoning demonstrates a cold, distant attitude between mother and daughter. Her disappointment is particularly emphasized when she states that she will “never speak to [Elizabeth] again”. As already noted, the expression “undutiful children” at the end of the example above, suggested that Mrs. Bennet considered it Elizabeth's duty to marry Mr. Collins. This argument is strengthened by the context in which the expression appears. Mrs. Bennet tries to apply a complaining and accusatory attitude toward Elizabeth, using such words as “undutiful” to make Elizabeth feel guilty about her decision and do what is socially expected of her. The fact that Elizabeth does not comply with her mother's wish, strengthens Fullerton's argument that

contemporary readers saw her as a controversial character (56). As Maurer notes, it was not uncommon that an 18th century female was influenced by her family to accept a proposal from a male (n.pag.). Hence, it was an accepted marital phenomenon.

The fictional character Elizabeth thinks Mr. Collins is a “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man” (Austen, 137). Elizabeth describes his character in a very negative way with words such as “conceited” and “narrow-minded”, expressions which are defined as “[To be e]xcessively proud of oneself” and “Not willing to listen to or tolerate other people’s views” respectively (Oxford Dictionaries, n.pag.). Such a negative description of Mr. Collins's character clearly indicates that Elizabeth has a strong dislike for him. As established earlier, she applies the liberal feminist idea of freedom to choose her own marital partner. She does not want to spend the rest of her life with a man of bad character, thus rejecting Mr. Collins's proposal. This supports the argument that Elizabeth declines Mr. Darcy's initial proposal because of his personality.

The conventional marital customs are observed when Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth's best friend Charlotte Lucas, and she accepts him. Charlotte justifies her decision by stating that “I ask only a comfortable home” (Austen, 126). Justifying her choice by saying that she only wants a “comfortable home” implies that she rejects the idea that it is important to preserve one's own values and independence in marriage. It would seem that she only cares for materialistic things. Charlotte's justification correlates with the 19th century notion discussed by Perkin, that many women wanted to marry in order to get away from their parental homes. In marriage, they received their own households, thus establishing themselves as “independent”, although that they were completely dependent on their husbands (Perkin, 3). Charlotte states that “considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (Austen, 126). Charlotte thinks that her future is secured, because now she is engaged to a socially acceptable man with financial capital. Moreover, she argues that Mr. Collins's “connections and situation in life” will constitute a happy marriage. Charlotte's statement does not emphasize the significance of liberal feminist marital values. She is confident in the belief that Mr. Collins's money and social recognition are of greatest importance. Consequently, she establishes herself as a marital traditionalist.

Elizabeth is disappointed and angry when she receives the news that Charlotte is marrying Mr. Collins. As Sheehan noted, Elizabeth demonstrates a moral independence throughout the novel (xxxii). This becomes very apparent when Jane tries to defend Charlotte's decision, and

Elizabeth states that Jane should not “for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity” (Austen, 137). Elizabeth's statement suggests that when Charlotte accepted Mr. Collins, she sacrificed her own values of “principle and integrity” for the sake of achieving an advantageous marriage. Jane tries to show support for Charlotte's decision, however, Elizabeth asks Jane to not “change the meaning” of such values. Thus, Elizabeth tells Jane to not lower the importance of having certain ethics in life. The fictional character Elizabeth's perspective on Charlotte's engagement relates to the idea criticized by Wollstonecraft, that 18th century women sacrificed their mental and physical abilities for the sake of achieving an advantageous marriage (74). Like Wollstonecraft in real life, the fictional Elizabeth disapproves of that notion.

In terms of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship, the narrator describes how Mr. Darcy develops a physical attraction toward Elizabeth rather early in the novel:

Elizabeth was ... becoming an object of ... interest in the eyes of ... Mr. Darcy [who] had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty ... But no sooner had he made it clear to himself ... that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. ... [and] he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing. [Furthermore, he] was caught by [the] easy playfulness [of her manners]. Of this she was perfectly unaware; -- to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable no where [sic].
(Austen, 23)

Initially, Mr. Darcy disapproves of Elizabeth's physical appearance, because the narrator describes how Mr. Darcy “had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty”. However, he discovers that “her dark eyes” seem to be “uncommonly intelligent”. It suggests that Mr. Darcy finds female intelligence and wit attractive, and that a wife with such a character would suit him. This contrasts with Mr. Collins view of a perfect wife, because he wants an obedient marital partner who is submissive to his authority. Mr. Darcy's attraction to Elizabeth's physical appearance is illustrated greatly when the narrator describes how Mr. Darcy “was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing”. When he is “forced to acknowledge” her physical attractiveness, he also discovers that he thinks she has a certain “playfulness” in her behavior. It implies that Mr. Darcy is drawn to Elizabeth's physical appearance, and then he realizes that she has a very charming personality too. However, as the narrator states, Elizabeth

is “perfectly unaware” that Mr. Darcy is beginning to fall in love with her. She develops an affectionate interest for Mr. Darcy later in the novel. As already noted by Hughes, such female emotions were considered controversial in the 19th century marital context. The major incentive for a woman to marry was financial security, social status and giving birth to a number of children (Maurer, n.pag., Hughes, n.pag.).

When Elizabeth begins to realize that “[Darcy] was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her.”, she emphasizes the significance of his “disposition and talents” (Austen, 312). She does not discuss his wealth, social status or that she has to enter into marriage in order to start a family. Elizabeth concludes that she and Mr. Darcy would constitute a good couple through the expression “[he] would most suit her”. She bases this belief on how his temperament and abilities compare to her own. She argues that “His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes.” (Austen, 312-313). Elizabeth acknowledges that they have different characters through the expression “though unlike her own”. However, she approves of his character by saying that “[to be engaged to such a man] would have answered all her wishes.”. Consequently, although that Elizabeth thinks Mr. Darcy's personality is very different to her own, his “disposition and talents” and “understanding and temper”, she believes, will suit her. As Elizabeth considers their complementary characters, she states that

It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both: by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (Austen, 313)

Elizabeth declares that such a coupling would be to the advantage “of both” herself and Mr. Darcy. Yet again, she refers to his character when she thinks about herself and Mr. Darcy together. She argues that with help of “her ease and liveliness”, “his mind” might be softened and “his manners improved”. In other words, Elizabeth is confident in the belief that she can help Mr. Darcy become more socially skilled. In return, she thinks that “his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world” would be of great use to herself. It suggests she recognizes that Mr. Darcy is a highly cultured and sophisticated man, a person who would encourage and support her own desire to know more about the world.

When Mr. Bennet receives the news that Elizabeth wants to marry Mr. Darcy, he responds

in a way that implies he has doubts regarding his daughter's choice. He knows that Elizabeth has a very independent, liberal feminist character because he tells her that “I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband” (Austen, 377). He is aware of that Elizabeth wants an affectionate marriage. He states that if Elizabeth married a man whom she does not “truly esteemed”, she would be caught in an unhappy marriage. He does not consider that Elizabeth may feel true affection toward Mr. Darcy. It implies that Mr. Bennet views Mr. Darcy as a disagreeable man who does not deserve true affection.

Mr. Bennet continues, saying that “Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery.” (Austen, 377). He begins this statement with the expression “lively talents”. This phrase strengthens the idea that he is conscious of Elizabeth's capable and independent character. He argues that her sophisticated talents would be “dangerous in an unequal marriage”. In other words, a traditional marriage in which the female is always obedient and dependent on her superior husband. Mr. Bennet does not reflect over the fact that he relates Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth's engagement to an “unequal marriage”. Thus, his initial reaction to the engagement suggests that he views Mr. Darcy as a marital traditionalist. Mr. Bennet concludes that if Elizabeth is to be caught in a traditional marriage, she could not escape what he describes as “discredit” and “misery”, defined as “[to be seen as] dishonest or untrue” and “[The] feeling of great physical or mental ... discomfort” respectively (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.pag., Oxford Dictionaries, n.pag.). Based on these definitions, Mr. Bennet's statement implies that if Elizabeth is to marry a man with traditionalist marital values, she could be publicly seen as an unreliable wife due to her character, and consequently suffer because of it. Mr. Bennet concludes that “[Elizabeth], let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life.” (Austen, 377). The italicized *you* suggests that it would be a surprise to Mr. Bennet if Elizabeth would end up in an unhappy marriage. Thus, he is perfectly aware of the fact that Elizabeth is a strong independent female who wants real happiness in her marriage.

At the end of the novel, the narrator provides a happy resolution for Elizabeth's desire to marry a man for whom she feels genuine affection: “Elizabeth ... was earnest and solemn in her reply; [she explained to Mr. Bennet] that Mr. Darcy was really the object of her choice, by explaining the gradual change which her estimation of him had undergone” (Austen, 377). The narrator illustrates Elizabeth's enthusiastic feelings for Mr. Darcy through the expressions “earnest” and “solemn”, defined as “[S]incere and intense conviction” and “Formal and

dignified” respectively (Oxford Dictionaries, n.pag.). The narrator demonstrates how sincere and serious Elizabeth is in her decision to marry Mr. Darcy. Furthermore, the narrator describes how Elizabeth provides Mr. Bennet with an explanation of how she came to change her mind about Mr. Darcy's character, emphasizing “the gradual [mental] change” that she has experienced regarding her judgment of Mr. Darcy's personality. Mr. Bennet then accepts Elizabeth's choice of marital partner. He states that “I have no more to say. If this be the case, he deserves you. I could not have parted with you ... to any one less worthy.” (Austen, 378). Mr. Bennet concludes that Mr. Darcy is “worthy” of Elizabeth's hand in marriage. It indicates that Mr. Bennet's previous dislike for Mr. Darcy has lessened to some extent, and that he thinks Mr. Darcy, due to his change of character, deserves Elizabeth.

By analyzing Elizabeth Bennet's marital views in relation to the historical context and the social environment of the novel, it has been established that Elizabeth represents a view of marriage that some contemporary readers found controversial. Furthermore, it has been noted that the fictional Elizabeth is portrayed to have values which correlate with the views of the contemporary author Mary Wollstonecraft. Both women question the established idea of marriage, while upholding their liberal feminist views on the institution. In terms of future research on the subject, the argument proposed here would be further enhanced by giving greater space to Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. There are some limitations to this study. The notion that Jane Austen had liberal feminist marital views, and that affection is a recurring theme among Austen's fictional characters, could be extended to other novels by Austen, such as *Emma* or *Persuasion*. In a new study of Elizabeth Bennet's character it would be interesting to examine the issue of whether Elizabeth, because of her liberal feminist views, can be seen as a symbol of protest against contemporary views of marriage and expectations of adult female behavior. It would also be interesting to study to what extent Elizabeth can be seen as a symbol of the 18th and 19th century female's struggle to achieve independence.

As demonstrated in this essay, Austen provides two clear depictions of marriage in the novel: the liberal feminist view and the traditional view. While Elizabeth represents the liberal feminist marital view, the conventional marital norms are represented by characters such as Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins regard Elizabeth as unreasonable when she declines Mr. Collins's proposal. Elizabeth defends herself by declaring that Mr. Collins has a bad character and that she has no feelings for him. However, Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins are traditionalists. They do not allow affectionate feelings in marriage,

hence they do not understand Elizabeth's reasons for refusing Mr. Collins. However, unlike Mr. Collins, Mr. Darcy thinks Elizabeth is an appealing independent woman because of her very unconventionality.

The end of the novel reveals that Mr. Darcy's gradual change of character, and the belief that they would constitute a good couple, motivate Elizabeth to accept his second proposal. Thus, the end of the novel depicts a happy resolution for the fictional character Elizabeth: Mr. Darcy is willing to accept her independent personality, and Mr. Bennet is willing to accept their engagement. Barbara Swords argues that “a good marriage, which offers ... love, respect, compatibility, equality, and happiness, is presented as the satisfying conclusion to [*Pride and Prejudice*]” (n.pag.). Elizabeth's liberal feminist values of equality, principle and integrity remain intact because she finds true love; as a result, she has no need to surrender to the conventional marital norms of the time. It is implied that had Elizabeth not met the man for whom she has a genuine affection, she would never have married. This is, at least, what many readers wish to believe and is implied in the spirit of the narrative.

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