

Jane Austen and the Power of the Marriage Plot

In Jane Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, there are two famous proposals of marriage, both addressed to the heroine Elizabeth Bennet. In one, the insufferable toady, Mr Collins, makes her an offer he thinks she can't refuse; it is lustful and patronising in equal proportions. She makes several attempts to refuse him politely, but is finally driven to tell him he is "the last man" who could ever make her happy, and she the last woman who could do the same for him. And then she walks out on him.

Collins – cleric, cousin and heir to the Bennet estate – suffers from what we call today a sense of entitlement. He is not Harvey Weinstein but he is perhaps the equivalent of the boss who can do so much for a female subordinate's career that he can't believe she would not want a date with him and the opportunity to get intimate. The difference between Lizzy and today's put-upon female underling is that the former can say "no" in plain and brutal terms when she needs to, and back up her words with actions, while the latter hesitates and second-guesses herself.

The second proposal is Mr Darcy's ardent but self-important and blundering declaration of love: he has fallen in love with Elizabeth in spite of himself, in spite of their social inequality, in spite of her awful family, he tells her. This backhanded compliment is a total surprise to Miss Eliza Bennet, and at the same time a colossal insult, confirming her original impression of Darcy as a proud and heartless man who has since come between her beloved sister, Jane, and the man she loves, and who also has treated Mr Wickham, an inferior for whose welfare he had been responsible, unjustly. Suppressing her sense of the significance of Darcy's proposal she denounces his behaviour as "not gentlemanlike" (a well-

aimed blow)and tells him that she had long ago decided he was “the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.” He is down at the bottom of the list with Mr Collins.

Darcy, astonished, angered and wounded by this spirited and increasingly angry refusal, is another “entitled” man, his ordinary masculine privilege of proposing and disposing enhanced by superior breeding and great wealth. Attractive as he naturally is to Elizabeth (and we can see from the beginning that they are attracted, despite themselves) and enticing as his wealth and position are to a relatively poor daughter of the lesser gentry, she is too aware of her own dignity and has too much pride to accept what is really another patronising proposal.

It is this robust sense of self-worth that the unhappy women of today’s Me Too movement seem to have lacked, temporising with and often giving in to – *not* offers of marriage, of course, but mere pressure for sex, or at least tolerance for sleazy talk and groping. Apparently, the job they hoped to get, or the one they wanted to hold onto, was worth more to them than their self-respect. Beyond the workplace, the need to keep a boyfriend or to get a second date – because there is no hope of anything better – has the same effect.

Elizabeth Bennet would tell young women: “Even if it’s the last man in town, don’t demean yourself by doing what you don’t want, what you despise. Tell him to get lost. Walk out. Hold out for true love and marriage, and if it doesn’t come you can still be happy and fulfilled in other ways.”

Behind her is Jane Austen herself, who accepted an offer of marriage at the age of 27 and broke off the engagement the next morning because, as Elinor Dashwood (the “sensible” half of the *Sense and Sensibility* sisters) says, “the worst and most irremediable of all evils [is] a connection for life” with an unsuitable man.

If this advice about marriage according to Jane Austen writing 200 years ago seems irrelevant to our current concerns about relations between the sexes, it's not.

It is marriage that gives meaning to sex and lifts it out of the realm of the [murky and ambiguous](#) and into the sunshine of committed love, with its prospect of generating new life and the joy of raising a family. Outside of marriage, sex is all ambiguity, insecurity and even danger – to physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, risks that are magnified for the children born of uncommitted relationships. Despite its failures, the institution of marriage has served the vast majority of people well and remains the best hope of happiness for the majority today.

That is why marriage is the central motif of classical romantic comedy. It is the ideal on which the plot turns and which it ultimately fulfils, at least for the main characters. This is certainly the case in Austen, where all events, both negative and positive, contribute to the heroine's finally marrying the *right* person for her. In [Persuasion](#), it happens for Anne Elliot after a broken engagement and eight years' separation. In *Emma*, after 400 pages of her meddling in other people's romances and failing to see where her own heart lay all the time.

It happens for almost all Austen's lovers without pre-testing their sexual compatibility with their intended. There are exceptions, among the minor characters: the plausible fortune hunter George Wickham, after courting Elizabeth, runs off with Lydia Bennet with no intention of marrying her (having no means to support her); in *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford encourages the unhappily married Maria Bertram to run away with him and then abandons her. There have always been self-centred, manipulative men, and women, but in Austen their errors tend to prove the rule: "no" is the default position for sex outside marriage. And, she would say, sensible women would make it their own today.

All this happens within a social context where the norms governing relations between the sexes are clear and the rituals of courtship understood by everybody. Austen's courting couples spend very little time alone. They learn about each other by observing the other in company, at neighbourly dinners, conversing in a corner of the room, dancing, in a stroll around the home garden, or in a country walk with others. It takes a village to make a marriage, but not always in the same way.

In *Persuasion* the renewal of the relationship between Anne and Captain Wentworth reaches its proper conclusion without their even speaking face to face, though they are in the same room, so delicate is the courting process for this long separated pair. He overhears a conversation in which she insists that women do not forget their men as quickly as the latter, busy about many things, forget their women, confined at home where "our feelings prey upon us." Wentworth, at a desk writing a letter, realises that she is speaking about their relationship and quickly dashes off another letter declaring his love, and leaves it for her.

Novelistic devices aside, the intensity of the emotions in this scene speaks volumes for the patience and restraint that social customs and respect for the freedom of the other require of the estranged lovers – and promises even greater happiness from their long delayed union.

Austen tells us: delayed gratification, supportive social norms, getting to know your love interest in the context of his or her family and community, and, above all, recognising marriage as the fulfilment of sexual love – these are the things that make for happiness and social harmony for the majority of mankind.

This is the happy and meaningful plot that has been lost in much of contemporary society. And that is what bedevils relations between the sexes today, not "patriarchal power". If

marriage were restored to its proper place, Jane Austen would admonish us, male entitlement would have as little scope as it did in *Pride and Prejudice*, cut short by women empowered to say "no" as well as "yes".

And, there would be great novels again. Because, how can you write a decent love story about people who are too scared to get married?

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