

Proper Matches, Romantic Elopements, & True Love in Jane Austen's Novels

Readers of Jane Austen's novels recognize the plot that informs every story, the business of marriage that determines the future happiness of each eligible woman. Whom will Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* marry? A pervasive influence in each novel is the worldly consideration of the proper match, meaning the economic and sociable advantages that follow from marriages that rescue women from financial dependence on their families and the stigma of old maid.

Viewed in the light of benefits and perquisites, a marriage proposal naturally carries supreme importance—even to the extent that women feel coercion from families to accept offers from men for whom they feel no attraction or admiration as in the case of Elizabeth Bennet receiving Mr. Collin's declaration of love in *Pride and Prejudice* or Fanny Price hearing of Henry Crawford's intentions in *Mansfield Park*. In the eyes of family members seeking the material well-being of marriageable women, an advantageous match deserves acceptance. A woman may never receive another proposal, and a rejection shows utter imprudence. Mrs. Bennet warns Elizabeth: "But I tell you what, Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead."

Austen's novels also portray rash elopements that end in folly or shame with little prospect for marital happiness. Uncontrollable passion violates good judgment, disregards propriety, and disgraces the family name. Impulsive romances overlook the practical requirements for marital stability and security that depend on money. Just as proper matches make love a matter of shrewd calculation and self-interest, hasty elopements lack the prudence to foresee embarrassing or disastrous consequences. Lydia Bennet's shocking elopement with the irresponsible Mr. Wickham, notorious for indebtedness and extravagant spending, not only brings scandal to the family but also foreshadows a marriage with little foundation for growth in love. Henry Crawford, for all his declarations of true love for Fanny, soon turns his thoughts to a married woman in his pursuit of selfish pleasure: "The event was so shocking, that there were moments even when her heart

revolted from it as impossible”—a woman married six months eloping with a man professing his devotion to Fanny.

While men like Mr. Collins and Henry Crawford offer love, their ulterior motives remain suspect, and the women they court sense the absence of honorable intentions despite their profession of strong attachment and irresistible attraction. While dashing men like Wickham and Henry Crawford present themselves as cultivated gentlemen with polished manners, they soon betray their ungallant conduct as they flirt with one woman after another and trifle with their feelings for their passing pleasure and selfish pastime. Frank Churchill in *Emma* also falls into this category as he feigns a romantic interest and courtship with Emma, using her as a ploy to conceal his secret love for Jane Fairfax and rouse her jealousy. Thus both the proper matches and the affairs of elopement pose as overtures of love with pretentious appearances or false promises without the integrity and honor of true love. Women who marry unworthy men of disreputable character or dishonorable motives compromise the highest ideals of marriage and soon settle into relationships of mutual toleration rather than an abiding relationship of shared affection and the deepest bonds of love—a situation Austen illustrates in the marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Women like Charlotte Lucas who marry for the economic and social advantages of marriage or elope like Lydia Bennet without admiration or respect for the moral character of their spouse acquiesce to a conventional view of marriage, one summarized by Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins' proposal within days of Elizabeth's rejection of his offer: "I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and 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 marital state." Lydia, on the other hand, acts on a false view of romance based only on the feelings of the moment and the excitement of the passions, thrilled to boast that she married before her two older sisters and oblivious of the disreputable character of her husband. Charlotte and Lydia have escaped the fate of old maid but, in Elizabeth's judgment, "have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage."

Women most influenced by the temptation of the advantageous proper match or by the threat of old maid receive much advice from parents, guardians, or interested third parties counseling them to act on the basis of worldly prudence and overlook moral reservations and the true desires of the heart. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, Fanny Price's affluent uncle and aunt, urge a prospective match between Henry Crawford and Fanny as irresistibly promising—a London gentleman married to the daughter of a poor family whose father, "without education, fortune, or connections," has no distinction. They urge her to comply and exert great persuasion to make Fanny change her

mind.

This pattern of outside interference in the affairs of the heart always spoils the beauty of romance and the natural experience of falling in love as it does in the meddlesomeness of Mrs. Bennet insisting that Elizabeth marry Collins and Lady Russell disapproving Anne Elliot's marriage to Captain Wentworth.

In *Persuasion* Anne suffers a similar dilemma, for her widowed father, Sir Walter Elliot, entrusts the care of his daughter Anne to the worldly Lady Russell who disapproves of Anne's abiding love for Captain Wentworth. Lady Russell dreads the thought of Anne, "with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind," marrying beneath her social status to a naval officer "who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining influence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession." Likewise, Emma assumes the role of all-knowing matchmaker and meddles in the sweet romance of the simple Harriet Smith to elevate her social status and dissuade her from marriage to an honest gentleman farmer who loves her dearly but cannot afford her the luxury or social distinction of Mr. Elton. Austen's heroines, however, do not let others do their thinking for them. Independent-minded, they rise above conventional thinking and hold a higher ideal of love that determines their choices rather than worldly wisdom.

Elizabeth, Fanny, and Ann show an independence of mind, moral integrity, and purity of heart that aspire to the magnificence of marriage. Elizabeth not only rejects Collins' offer but also Darcy's first proposal. Neither gentleman won her love, esteem, or admiration or properly courted her to prove his worthiness and reveal noble intentions.

Collins visited the Bennet family to select a wife in a two-week period to appease the wishes of his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh and gain the respectability expected of an Anglican clergyman, and Darcy, bewitched by Elizabeth's beautiful eyes, abruptly proposes to her without proof of cordial friendship, good manners, or courtesy to her family. Both Collins and Darcy presume that Elizabeth will naturally express gratitude and give consent because she stands to gain and improve her material and social status. Collins also reminds her that "it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you." Elizabeth, however, remains unmoved by insincere professions of love that do not touch her heart, win the assent of her conscience, or make prudent sense to her mind.

Fanny Price and Anne Elliot act with the same integrity and uncompromising principles. No matter how much Anne's uncle and aunt urge the proper match and Henry Crawford's sister pleads on her brother's behalf and makes light of his flirtations ("the liking to make girls a little in love with him, is not so dangerous to a woman's happiness"), Fanny declares, "I cannot think

well of a man who sports with any woman's feelings." Anne too knows the true state of her heart that has not changed since Lady

Russell advised against marrying Captain Wentworth and disappointing the expectations of family approval. No other suitors fulfill Anne's ideals of noble manhood except the man her family rejected ten years earlier. When women advising her father match Anne with her cousin Charles Elliot as a suitable courtship, she thinks independently and decisively: "Mr. Elliot is evidently a disingenuous, artificial, worldly man, who has never had any better principle to guide him than selfishness."

As these novels show, it is bad advice for older generations to intimidate younger eligible women with dire warnings to accept the first marriage proposal and consider it their one and only chance. Marriage does not promise human happiness when selfish motives, worldly gains, and family ambitions influence the most personal of decisions.

The women who refuse offers of marriage for justified reasons, moral standards, and the honest feelings of the heart do not lose but gain. By refusing the lesser or false good, they gain the highest good. According to proverbial wisdom, if something is truly intended for you, it will come your way another time. The cardinal virtue of prudence always seeks the highest moral ends by the most ethical means and never resorts to calculations of self-interest.

By refusing Collins' pompous offer when he pretended "being run away with his feelings" and Darcy's inappropriate first offer when he had not gained the favor or friendship of Elizabeth, Elizabeth created other opportunities for true love to run its course. When Darcy and Elizabeth meet by chance at Pemberley Woods after a bitter argument about the ways he has offended her and she has insulted him, both are humbled and apologetic. He realizes his pride, and she recognizes her prejudice. Darcy especially wins Elizabeth's heart by the warm cordiality of his welcome to her and her aunt and uncle in their tour of the family home as he treats them with the most gracious manners:

That he should even speak to her was amazing!—but to speak with such civility, to enquire after her family! Never in her life had she seen his manners so little dignified, never had he spoken with more gentleness as on this unexpected meeting.

Thus Darcy wins Elizabeth's heart by making an effort to please her, to conquer his haughty reserve, to rise to the level of her expectations of a true gentleman, and especially to prove the worthiness of his love by his magnanimity in persuading Wickham to marry Lydia and saving the Bennet family from scandal: "Such a change in a man of so much pride, excited not

only astonishment but gratitude—for to love, ardent love it must be attributed.”

Fanny Price also illustrates the good fortune that accompanies a pure heart that rises above ulterior motives and acts only for the most disinterested reasons. Her rejection of Henry Crawford’s hand in marriage does not prove to be a foolhardy, impractical decision as forewarned by her elders. Following her conscience and listening to her heart rather than surrendering to the wisdom of the world, Fanny later marries Edmund Bertram, a magnanimous gentleman who appreciates and cherishes her as the model of an elegant woman with the highest moral standards, impeccable moral judgment, and sterling character unspoiled by the fashionable world: “Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort.”

Likewise, Anne Elliot’s uncompromising heart has remained true to Captain Wentworth and his unwavering devotion to her. Despite the passage of time and introductions to other suitors or eligible women, Anne and Wentworth’s enduring love never falters. As they reunite once again after an absence of nine years, they affirm that nothing has changed their undying love for one another:

There they exchanged again those feelings and those promises which had been followed by so many, many years of division and separation. Here they returned again into the past, more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their reunion, than when it had first been projected; more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other’s character, truth, and attachment.

Austen’s heroines, then, live, choose, and marry according to the highest wisdom about love that is ruled by principle, not convention—by the prudent mind, pure heart, and informed conscience rather than by the false prudence of the world preoccupied by money, image, lust, or self-interest.

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