

# ☞ *Pride & Prejudice* Cultural Influences ☛

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This essay discusses the three major cultural/historical influences in *Pride and Prejudice*—marriage, money and the education of women. Marriage is seemingly always on the minds of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and this is telegraphed to us in the very famous line that opens the novel, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” These characters are either wishing for it, despairing of it ever happening, suffering from the lack of opportunity or, for those already married, reacting to their situation in life. Jane Austen provides a wide array of marriages to examine in this novel and the social satire, on first reading, often disguises the historical context of these marriages.

### Marriage

If you haven't read our Online Exhibit on Men, Women and Marriage (<http://www.jasnachicago.org/jane-austen/online-exhibits/96-jane-austen/online-exhibits/114-men-women-and-marriage>) by Jeff Nigro, please do so to understand how limited the choices were for females in the gentry and the aristocracy. Women in these classes had to marry or, as the narrator so coolly tells us of Charlotte Lucas's thoughts on her engagement to Mr. Collins, “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.”

While Darcy and Elizabeth's happy marriage is one of the most romantic in literature, arranged marriages were not unheard of in this period, especially among the gentry and aristocratic classes. This is reflected in Lady Catherine's explanation of the kind of marriage she expects her daughter and Darcy to form and she may have experienced herself: “The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of his mother, as well as of her's. While in their cradles, we planned the union:” However, by the late Georgian Era, the arranged marriage was not looked on as the ideal arrangement, due to the influence of the writings of Voltaire (1694–1778), Rousseau (1712–1778) and other Enlightenment philosophers. The affectionate relationship between both parent and child and



husband and wife was encouraged and, over time, became the norm in society. This new thinking gave children more freedom in the choice of a spouse but parents, especially fathers, still carried great authority in their children's choices.

One had to be over the age of 21 in order to marry without parental consent, if one wanted to marry by common license (compared to reading the banns in church for three weeks). Mr. Bennet is approached three times for his consent to the marriage of his daughters. Clearly, Lydia is under the legal age required by law, and depending on when Elizabeth's birthday is, she may be as well, but both Darcy and Bingley's approaching Mr. Bennet is a mark of respect for him and his authority as the head of the Bennet family.

Those bucking parental authority had two choices available to them. The first way around one's parents, was to elope to Gretna Green, located just over the Scottish border, where the marriage laws were much looser. Initially, this is where the Bennets assumed Lydia and Wickham had traveled to. The second method required greater subterfuge, in that the couple would need to establish residency in another parish for a week, then read the banns for the required three weeks, which was quite easy to do in a big city like London. While the stated reason for Lydia marrying in London was to minimize the embarrassment to the family from her returning home unmarried, another chief reason Lydia and Wickham marry in London was that it is the parish where Wickham met the residency requirement.

There was a third way to get married and Mrs. Bennet tells us about it when she gloats, "And a special licence. You must and shall be married by a special licence." This exclamation is another hallmark of Mrs. Bennet's continued ignorance and stupidity. Marrying by license was a status symbol because of the cost to acquire the license, compared to reading banns which were free. A special license carried with it an additional cachet as they were issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury's office for even greater cost and allowed the couple to marry at any place and at any time. However, the issuance of this type of license was very restricted. One way to acquire one harkens back to Mrs. Bennet saying of Darcy, "Tis as good as a Lord!". A peer or a child of a peer could purchase a special license but as Darcy is only the grandson of an earl, this option is not available to him.

The actual ceremony, again dictated by law, had to take place in a consecrated building between the hours of eight in the morning and noon. That is why any refreshments served after the ceremony was referred to as a wedding breakfast. But before the wedding ceremony could take place, the all-important money matters would be dealt with. This issue of dowries, inheritances and annual income is another major theme in *Pride and Prejudice*.

## Money

In the class in which Jane Austen was born and wrote about, marriages involved the joining of estates and assets as well as joining two people together. There was a social stigma for young women to remain unmarried but the Bennet family finances provides a chief incentive for these young ladies to marry and to marry a man with a comfortable income.

To understand how people talked about their income, here's a chart of the characters about whom we know their worth. Notice that the gentlemen's financial status is based on annual incomes while the ladies mention a fixed amount.

Character	Worth	Reference
Charles Bingley	“four or five thousand a year”	Volume 1, Chapter 1
Fitzwilliam Darcy	“A clear ten thousand per annum”	Volume 1, Chapter 16
Mr. Bennet	“an estate of two thousand a year”	Volume 1, Chapter 7
The Bennet daughters (pre-marriage)	“equal share of the five thousand pounds secured among your children after the decease of yourself and my sister”	Volume 3, Chapter 3
Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst	“had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds”	Volume 1, Chapter 4
Georgiana Darcy	“my sister’s fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds”	Volume 3, Chapter 12

The gentlemen receive income from the harvests produced on and from the tenants farming their estates, along with other investments; therefore, their worth is expressed as an annual income. The ladies receive a fixed sum as these are their dowries, which could be set out by their parents’ marriage articles or settlement before they were even born. The Bennet girls have a very small dowry and their situation is made even more dire because of a legal device put on the Longbourn estate, called an entailment.

Without getting too deep into legalese, the inheritance of estates was based on primogeniture, the practice of the eldest son inheriting everything with his younger siblings shut out from sharing in the inheritance of the estate itself. A conscientious man would make other provisions for the younger sons and all daughters of the family. Many of the landed estates had a further provision called strict settlement that eliminated any daughter’s claim. Even if all five Bennet daughters only brought forth sons into the world, they would not be able to inherit any part of Longbourn as the entail would insure that the entire estate would pass whole to the next male in line, in this case, Mr. Collins. Unless these two gentlemen come to an agreement to break the entail, only Mr. Collins dying without a male heir while Mr. Bennet is still alive, severs the entail and then the Bennet daughters would equally inherit the estate at their father’s death.

This, along with the hushed-up scandal of Lydia’s elopement, makes the remaining sisters’ marriage prospects very precarious and if not for Darcy’s interference, this time in a good way, the girls could have remained the Misses Bennet for the rest of their lives. The only way they would be able to earn a much reduced but genteel income would be to rely on their wits and education by becoming governesses or companions.

## Education of Women

The theme of the education of women revolves around the question of what makes an accomplished woman. Caroline Bingley gives us what was generally understood to be the standard accomplishments that a young lady aspired to in her education: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but

half deserved.” We are told that both Bingley sisters “had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town”, which, based on the above description, were more like finishing or charm schools rather than places of formal education.



Since women were not admitted to the Universities of Cambridge or Oxford, and were steered away from such subjects as higher mathematics, Latin or Greek, an aspiring scholar such as Mary Bennet would be highly reliant on the volumes in her father’s library. It is to her loss that her only source of knowledge appears to be based on ponderous texts of strict moral philosophies such as Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Ladies* (1765).

On the other hand, the youngest Miss Bennets, Kitty and Lydia, could use some of that moral instruction. They only appear to read novels, thought by many of the time to be dangerous reading material. This was especially true of the very popular gothic novel, for it encouraged young ladies’ fantasies and desires and distracted from what was considered “improving” reading—the conduct books.

Jane and Elizabeth have benefitted from all these sources of learning. Neither of them possesses the wild abandon of a Kitty or Lydia but they take enjoyment in life. Neither of them subscribes to the pedantic moralizing of Mary, yet both are seen to be highly moral in their interactions. While they may not be as technically proficient in the arts as a Miss Bingley, their accomplishments include humor and compassion, both emotions in short supply in Miss Bingley. When combined with Darcy’s additional requirement that the accomplished woman should “add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading”, it appears that Austen is indicating that Jane and Elizabeth are the truly accomplished women. And after all, what does Darcy say he loves about Elizabeth but “the liveliness of your mind”?

#### Illustrations

Page 2: C.E. Brock 1907 illustration for *Pride and Prejudice*: <http://www.mollands.net/etexts/prideandprejudice/pnpillus.html>

Page 4: Hugh Thompson 1894 illustration for *Pride and Prejudice*: <http://scrap.oldbookillustrations.com/post/9822323610/thomson-pride-prejudice-frontispiece>