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Eighteenth-Century Female Conduct in Jane Austen's  
*Pride and Prejudice* –  
An Analysis of Elizabeth Bennet

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Brief summary of the novel and its central characters.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Accomplishments.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Courtship.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Marriage.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Introduction

During the eighteenth century, courtesy literature was a highly popular genre. It embodied so-called conduct manuals that advocated proper manner and behaviour. They presented to their readers the qualities, the formation and the conduct which a gentleman/woman must possess (Fritzer 3). Chiefly aimed towards a female audience, the purpose of the manuals was thus to function as a guide in their endeavours to become gentlewomen (Brophy 6). Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) was written at this time, when courtesy literature was very popular reading. The novel focuses greatly on behaviour and manner and it is therefore likely that there is a correlation between *Pride and Prejudice* and the writings of the contemporary conduct manuals.

The dominant eighteenth-century ideology of femininity suggested a "natural association between women and the private sphere, domesticity and leisure and the identification of women with feeling and sensibility rather than reason" (Jones 5-6). It would be interesting to see how this is reflected upon the novel's main female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who at first glance rather seems inclined to be more avant-garde as a character. The question to be answered is therefore: does Austen's characterization of Elizabeth reflect the generally advocated comportment of her own time or is she portraying an unconventional young woman? The purpose of this essay is consequently to analyse Elizabeth to see if she conforms to the general image of a woman of Austen's contemporary society, or if she differs from it. Thus, the intention is to put her manners and behaviour in contrast to what was advocated by contemporary conduct manuals. Thereby, it will hopefully become clearer if the female character that Austen portrays is inclined to be more unconventional than what was expected of a woman of that time.

The situation for women in general at this time was that they were under the dominion of men all of their lives: first their father's and later, if they married, that of their husband (Brophy 41-42). Because female education in the same period was based on self-discipline and mainly concerned with developing social skills (Kelly 252), it was not easy for women to find work. So if a woman did not marry nor was from a wealthy family that could support her financially, she did not have an easy existence ahead of her (Wollstonecraft 110). Not surprisingly, the chief goal in a woman's life was therefore to

find a husband who could provide her with the security of a home. Consequently, the process of attracting a man's interest became equally significant in the life of a young woman (Jones 14). These are matters dealt with in previous studies of the lives of eighteenth-century women and they are also claimed to have played a considerable role in the contemporary discussions on the subject of femininity (Jones very first page, not numbered). There are several issues that deserve attention in an analysis of female social roles; however, the subject will be approached through analyses of Elizabeth, concerning matters that are illustrative of a woman's life at that time. These matters are: accomplishments, courtship and marriage. Furthermore, it should be noted that the discussion will focus on middle and upper-class women only. Below, a brief outline of the central characters of the novel will be mentioned, in order avoid excessive retelling in analysis that will follow.

### **Brief summary of the novel and its central characters**

*Pride and Prejudice* deals chiefly with the themes of behaviour, appearances and personal development, with particular focus on the main characters Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. Elizabeth has four sisters: Jane, the eldest, and her younger sisters Mary, Kitty and Lydia. Mr Darcy becomes acquainted with the Bennet family through his dear friend Mr Bingley. Mr Bingley soon falls in love with Jane, who is therefore naturally acquainted with his sisters, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. The Bennet sisters have a cousin, Mr Collins, a conceited man, who is especially proud of his connection with upper-class Lady Catherine De Bourgh. He asks for Elizabeth's hand in marriage due to the convenience of such a union, as he is will one day inherit her father's estate. Elizabeth, however, rejects his offer. This turns out not to be her only chance at love, as her and Mr Darcy's acquaintance eventually develops into a more romantic connection. However, before they are able to admit to this, they must both develop as individuals. Along the road they meet with preconceptions and appearances and other thought-provoking behaviour, which compels them to ransack their own selves – something that in, due course, will be what brings them closer together.

## Accomplishments

During the course of the eighteenth century, female education was a much contested issue. In the early years of the debate, only a modest number of the young bourgeois women received some type of formal education (Jones 98). Arguments flourished claiming that women were in possession of a weaker mind than men, which made them rather unfit to learn. It was instead perceived as enough for a woman to have the capacity to govern her family and unconditionally obey her husband (Fénélon 102). An account that explicitly confirms such view-points is found in a conduct manual from 1779. However, the contrary is here stated, claiming that “[t]hat learning does not belong to the female character, and that the female mind is not capable of a degree of improvement equal to that of the other sex, are narrow and unphilosophical prejudices” (Knox 109). This serves as an indication of the fact that there was an established belief that education was not a matter to impose on the frail, female mind.

The chief goal in a woman’s life at this time was to find a husband who could provide her with a home and the competition for eligible, single men eventually increased, as a consequence of a growing middle class. The main concern for women, as described in the many conduct manuals of the time, was therefore how to best be an object of male desire (Jones 14). To best achieve this objective, it eventually became customary for most young women to receive some sort of education (Jones 99). However, the teaching was very restricted, and young women were only taught what were regarded as attractive female talents, which would help to improve a woman’s social usefulness in the domestic sphere (Brophy 91). In practice, this meant training in various ornamental accomplishments. These accomplishments included for instance, reading, dancing, music, drawing and French (Chapone 104-106). Conduct manuals advocated this kind of more superficial knowledge, with the claim that a woman who has only little learning is more serene than “she who is acquainted with too much” (Fritzer 10). Likewise, the image was endorsed that a virtuous young woman should disregard academic studies (Ibid.). Indeed, a woman was also expected to learn to be virtuous. The prime virtues to display were temperance, chastity, modesty, pity and compassion (Brophy 43-45). To possess these was essential in order to become a fully accomplished

gentlewoman. It required a large amount of self-restraint in a woman, as is described below:

To be a mistress of oneself was paramount – genteel ladies aimed to be self-possessed in social encounters, self-controlled in the face of minor provocations, self-sufficient in the midst of ingratitude, and, above all, brave and enduring in the grip of tragedy and misfortune. (Vickery 8)

When Elizabeth dines with Lady Catherine de Bourgh at Rosings, the latter asks if she plays or sings, to which Elizabeth replies, to Lady Catherine's satisfaction, that she does so a little. After further questioning, Lady Catherine understands that Elizabeth's accomplishments are not comprehensive, due to her insufficient education and this fact appals her. Elizabeth, despite being brusquely put under public scrutiny by Lady Catherine, retains a temperate and collected attitude and informs her that she and her sisters received a liberal education, which encouraged them to acquire the knowledge they desired from reading books (109-110). Elizabeth's temperance in this scene depicts her as a virtuous young woman, self-possessed and self-control, as opposed to Lady Catherine, whose indiscreet behaviour implies that she instead believes ornamental accomplishments to be of somewhat greater importance than virtue.

Another example of such virtuous and sober behaviour on Elizabeth's behalf is found in her reaction to her sister Lydia's tactless ways. Fearing that Lydia's disposition will not present her as a virtuous young woman, if allowed to go on a trip to Brighton without parental supervision, she insists upon their father to impede her from going: "[i]f you were aware [...] of the very great disadvantage to us all, which must arise from the public notice of Lydia's unguarded and imprudent manner" (151), Elizabeth pleads to her father. This indicates that she is concerned about how one presents oneself to others and that there is certain behaviour that she believes is not flattering to a young woman's character. However, Elizabeth is not presented as self-righteous. In a conversation with Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley, who both claim to fully agree with the contemporary idea of what an accomplished woman should be like, she speaks her mind and says in response, "I am not surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*" and then she adds that "I never saw such a woman" (27). With these statements she appears to be of the opinion that it is unrealistic to expect a woman

to possess all virtues as well as accomplishments. Nor does she expect to find that any woman is that impeccable, as she continues to say that she has never met a woman of the kind.

No woman was expected to excel in her accomplishments. Rather, she was supposed to learn enough to present her in a respectable manner and keep her from becoming vain in the pursuits of acquiring more knowledge (Fénélon 104). Courtesy books also tended to make a distinction between surface and deep manners. This dichotomy was meant to emphasize the proper approach to the acquisition of accomplishments. The former represented a superficial approach – learning only to meet the courtesy requirements, without showing natural interest or skill. The latter embodied the better approach, which endorsed learning as a combination of feeling and natural talent (Fritzer 10). Similarly, when asked to play the piano and sing at a social gathering at Longbourne, Elizabeth displays a very virtuous character in her fairly modest, yet pleasing, performance because she displays no intention to neither flaunt nor conceal her accomplishments. On the contrary, her younger sister Mary tries her utmost to become a fully accomplished young woman and impatiently succeeds her sister at the piano. She is anxious to acquire accomplishments because it is the unmistakable trademark of a gentlewoman. This attitude penetrates her performance by her apparent lack of natural talent and personal engagement and unfortunately, this attempt to excel only makes her appear conceited and lacking of virtue (17).

Despite the fact that education for women became the norm in this period, the portrayal of the intellectual woman as an unattractive individual was a dominant stereotype and a powerful image (Jones 99). It was argued that when a woman engages in education, she risks becoming “ignorant of the duties and virtues of domestic life” and “without any delicacy of mind and manners which are the surest guard of female virtue” (Reeve 117). Excessive education was thus seen to have the power to distract women’s attention from their duties as virtuous wives, mothers and mistresses of the household. Many well-educated women must therefore prepare themselves for a possible life of solitude. However, those who descended from families of fortune could hope to rely upon them for their livelihood (Wollstonecraft 110). On the other hand, an uneducated, unaccomplished woman was also looked down upon. An accomplished woman, who displayed a modest and self-controlled character, thus encompassed the image of a fine,

educated young gentlewoman and this was therefore what young women aspired to become. Not surprisingly, the Bingley sisters, who are described as very fine young women, have indeed been educated “in one of the first private seminars in town” (11). Despite this, Elizabeth does not entirely approve of them; she considers them rather “proud and conceited” (Ibid). Pride and vanity are features that do not belong to an accomplished woman’s character and despite their fine education, they have actually not become the accomplished gentlewomen that they at first glance appear to be.

When Elizabeth dines with Lady Catherine, as described above, she does not seem ashamed to discuss the form of education she and her sisters have received. In relation to her opinion of the Bingley sisters, it appears as if she believes that in the cases where she lacks the knowledge of more ornamental accomplishments, such as French and drawing, she makes up for them by possessing a virtuous character. In contrast, the Bingley sisters give the impression of having concentrated too much on acquiring ornamental accomplishments to meet with the contemporary courtesy requirements, without focusing as much on the development of their characters. Elizabeth’s relaxed attitude to her own education could be an indication that she appreciates an education that develops a virtuous character more than the ability to flaunt ornamental accomplishments, like those of the Misses Bingley.

A further example of the fact that she does not let her scarce list of accomplishments weaken her perception of herself as no less of a respectable woman is found in yet another conversation with Lady Catherine. This time, Lady Catherine questions Elizabeth about the nature of her relationship to her nephew, Mr Darcy. The condescending manner in which she demands information causes Elizabeth to lose respect for her, rather than subdue her. This is portrayed in the response to Lady Catherine’s rude declaration, that it would be absurd to believe that Mr Darcy could have feelings for Elizabeth: “If you believed it impossible to be true, sa[ys] Elizabeth, colouring with astonishment and disdain, I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far” (230). This unexpected boldness of address is rather shocking to Lady Catherine, who claims never to have been spoken to with such language (231). Nonetheless, Elizabeth does not allow such a demeaning attitude to hurt her integrity and concludes the conversation by saying that

'[y]ou have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in *his* affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. [...] You can *now* have nothing farther to say' ...[y]ou have insulted me, in every possible method' (233).

Lady Catherine is the one with whom education is repeatedly discussed and she appears to be the character that represents the contemporary endorsed point of view that it was crucial for young women to possess accomplishments. However, the quotation above illustrates that Elizabeth is highly aware of her own worth, despite not conforming to the contemporary image of an accomplished woman. She does not seem to regard herself as less of a respectable woman merely because she does not possess all of the accomplishments and virtuous character traits advocated by the conduct manuals of the time. Instead, it appears as if she is more inclined to appreciate education that derives from a personal interest in learning a certain accomplishment. She also seems to believe that it is more important to develop one's character than to focus on the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments with the chief objective of pleasing others.

## **Courtship**

Finding a husband was a very important matter in a woman's life in the eighteenth century. Therefore, to be courted by men was not just a casual affair. Courtship was usually a long-drawn process; sometimes spanning several years and often culminating in financial negotiations between the parties involved, especially in very wealthy families (Vickery 82). Furthermore, at this time, a daughter could not marry without the consent of her parents (Brophy 66). The extent to which a young man and woman were allowed to be part of the arrangement varied much from family to family. This meant that sometimes, a young woman did not have much of a choice of her own, while in other cases, parental approval was sought only as a final authorization of the union. Generally, the more money that was involved, the more unlikely it was for the young couple to be involved personally. Nonetheless, parents were concerned with their daughters' wellbeing and it was therefore common that the young women did have the right of veto if the parents had made a choice she did not approve of. Such an act of protest could

mean that the daughter was asked to reconsider her own reasons for not accepting their choice of husband. Although the daughter's opinion was heard, she was generally not expected to contradict the will of her parents (Brophy 95-96).

“What are men to rocks and mountains”, Elizabeth exclaims, at the prospect of a scenic tour to the Lakes with her uncle and aunt (103). This remark captures the attitude that a young woman was presumed to display in the time of courtship. Conduct manuals advocated behaviour that was intended to save a young woman from losing her honour when courted. She was thus encouraged not to display any interest and almost to show aversion when receiving the attention of the other sex (Brophy 107). Furthermore, it was claimed that “ladies [had] great reason to be cautious and watch over themselves; for even to listen to compliments, and gay addresses, [might] betray them into weakness and indiscretion” (Wilkes 31). Not surprisingly, chastity was the prime virtue that a woman could display when courted, as it was expected of her to behave in a manner that showed no signs of warm affection or physical urges towards her admirer (Vickery 136). It was also preferable for her to display her modesty by avoiding talking excessively and trying to be witty in the company of the other sex (Wilkes 31). The suitor, however, was to convince the young woman whom he desired that he was worthy of her affection by expressing his sentiments verbally or at times also in letters (Vickery 46). So, while the woman aimed at being recognised as virtuous, the man aspired to be able use his rhetorical skills to present himself worthy as a suitor and future husband (Vickery 54).

To escape the arduous existence that awaited a single woman, Elizabeth, as most women, relies on the financial support of a future husband, as she does not come from a wealthy family. She encounters three men who are interested in her and with whom she interacts: Mr Wickham, Mr Collins and Mr Darcy. Together, they provide an image of different approaches to courtship, as their behaviour vary somewhat. When Elizabeth meets Mr Wickham at a social gathering at her aunt's and uncle's house, there are a number of young women who all desire to be the centre of his attention, but he seats himself next to her. This flatters her. Wickham soon proves to have the gift of conversing and, not before long the topic is about the nature of his connection with Mr Darcy. He speaks freely on the subject and tells his story, which leaves Elizabeth shocked (55). However, in a letter from Darcy at a later stage, she is informed of the actual events that have contributed to the current relationship between the two men, which proves the

falsehood of the account given by Wickham. The manipulation of his story causes her to feel repugnance towards him. In addition, she feels great shame for believing a man who displays such bad manners as to give such a discrediting account of another man, considering that she was nearly a stranger to him (136-137). From her reaction, it is possible to understand that she finds it more demeaning than flattering to a man when he enhances his own character by dishonouring somebody else.

Another example of such an attempt to use oratorical skills to invoke her interest is made by her cousin Mr Collins. He has as a clergyman had the opportunity to practise these skills, and he makes use of them when meeting Elizabeth with the purpose of asking for her hand in marriage. Without any kind of previous affectionate or amorous bond between the two, he straightforwardly informs Mrs Bennet of his intention and is then given the honour of speaking to Elizabeth in private. His elaborate speech to her is focused on the convenience of a union between them and he presents her with a set of examples to stress this point. For instance, he bluntly informs her that “[y]our portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications” (74). Moreover, he is to inherit Mr Bennet’s estate and this would also secure a home for her sisters, should they never marry. However, his efforts are in vain, for Elizabeth is not charmed by either the supposed eloquence or the motives and therefore declines his proposal. Nevertheless, he believes her only to be shy and to be behaving as was customary at that time. He claims that he is aware that “it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of a man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour” (73). Yet, she insists upon the sincerity of her answer and her behaviour, displaying what is to him everything but what he expected of a young woman who had just received such a good offer.

Despite the apparent appropriateness of the offer, she declines it several times to convince Mr Collins that she is not acting shy or feigning her disinterest. By doing so, she displays an image of a woman who does not wish to marry where there is not a basis of mutual love and affection, even though she, as the majority of the women at this time, depended entirely upon the financial support of a husband. Her mother’s hysterical response to the dismissal of Mr Collins supports the idea that her reply was not expected, because it was indeed a good offer for a young woman like her. On the other hand, her father’s teasing statement that she would lose him if she accepted the proposal indicates

that there were those who agreed that a happy marriage required the couple's mutual love and affection (75-76). Nonetheless, her cousin's expectations are in accordance with the advice of the conduct manuals of the time. What he appears to have missed, however, is the fact that manuals also clearly stated that excessively formal behaviour was the trademark of an unsophisticated individual with no innate sense of propriety (Fritzer 67-70). Most likely, Elizabeth sees through his correct façade and finds his behaviour unnatural and not particularly appealing. This means that her view that good manners entail moderate and unpretentious behaviour is in accordance with what was advocated by the contemporary conduct manuals.

There was a turning point towards the middle of the eighteenth century concerning the view on courtship and marriage. The general opinion shifted from viewing marriage as almost a pure business agreement to considering it a state that two people should enter on the basis of their friendship and mutual love for one another (Brophy 126). Conduct manuals more frequently gave women the advice to enter marriage on the grounds that they felt esteem and affection towards their future husband and with the purpose of increasing their personal happiness (Gregory 52). As a consequence, the entire courtship process developed into something that would come to involve the young man and woman more than it had before. Thus, the parental dominance and control over the process also diminished (Brophy 138). In spite of these less restrained contacts between the young man and woman, a degree of role-playing was still expected in the contacts between the two. The woman was presumed to display a reserved and almost aloof attitude towards her suitor, and the latter was expected to respond to this with his warm admiration and noticeable eagerness to become hers (Brophy 126).

The very rich Mr Darcy and Elizabeth meet at several social gatherings and what she notices about him is how he is mostly silent and it is something that she perceives as arrogance on his behalf. At a dinner party, during her stay with Mr and Mrs Collins at the Parsonage, Darcy eventually explains that his tendencies to speak little are due to the fact that “[he does] not have the talent which some possess [...] of conversing easily with those [he has] never seen before” (116). Darcy is at this stage very fond of Elizabeth, but she does not share the same feelings for him yet. Throughout her visit at Mr and Mrs Collins's house, his visits there are very frequent, but there is no change in his tendency to be more quiet than talkative, particularly when Elizabeth's is present. This puzzles her,

but she draws the conclusion that his silence must be due to his lack of interest in her company and does not suspect that she actually is the reason for his frequent visits (119-120). Because of this, it takes her by surprise when Darcy confesses his true feelings for her, as if it could not be true, judging by the low profile he kept during their previous encounters (125). Elizabeth's sister Jane, who is deeply in love with Mr Bingley, also displays a similar complacent air of detachment, so as to almost show no sensibility at all in response to Bingley's attentions towards her (137). This is the same kind of behaviour that Mr Darcy displays, which Elizabeth interprets as mere dissatisfaction with the company on his behalf. This could imply that Elizabeth's expectations of courtship entailed the conventional role-play with the outgoing man and the more quiet and complacent woman. With this opinion in mind, it is clear that she could not infer anything from Mr Darcy's behaviour, as it was displayed in a manner entirely different from what was generally expected on the man's behalf.

Darcy's first marriage proposal to Elizabeth, subsequent to his declaration of his feelings for her, is received in a similar fashion to Mr Collins': it is rejected. The reason for her second discarding of an offer that would secure her with a future home is that Darcy does not regard her feelings when asking for her hand. Instead, he speaks of how her social inferiority has made him try to suppress his feelings for her, but that he now is forced to acknowledge the fact that he cannot manage to do so. The offer leaves Elizabeth angry and insulted (126-127). He shows no consideration as to the fact that they do not share any feelings for each other from previous courting. Nor does Darcy show her the respect that she wants from a man, as he candidly speaks ill of her family relations. Somehow they continually meet by chance, and, eventually, Elizabeth discovers that she actually has developed tender feelings for Darcy. This is, however, only after she notices a changed and more attentive behaviour on his behalf. She does then not display her newly discovered feelings overtly and whenever they meet in public she awaits his approach, rather than making any advances herself. She conceals her emotions so well that even her own father is taken by surprise when she tells him about her love for Darcy. Luckily, Darcy is courageous enough to finally admit to Elizabeth that his feelings for her and his desire to marry her have remained unchanged since his proposal to her. Only then does she admit to having feelings for him too. The way in which she gives her answer is not by feigning her disinterest; instead she willingly informs him of her sentiments. When

she rejected Mr Collins' proposal, he believed it all to be part of the advocated conduct for women during courtship, and had expected such a reaction. In this case with Darcy she shows a more honest and straightforward attitude than what was generally expected to be displayed during the time of courtship.

Mr Collins' and Mr Darcy's proposals both give emphasis to the fact that Elizabeth will reject even the wealthiest of men, if there is no mutual love and admiration. Mr Bennet also points this out to her when he says "I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband" (246). It is thus also explicitly stated that Elizabeth represents a type of woman who needs more than convenient offers and practical agreements to willingly invest in a relationship. To her, the prospect of a happy marriage is based on mutual affection, esteem and respect and she does not seem prepared to negotiate on these prerequisites. No matter who courts her and what may appear the wiser choice for a young woman of her position, she chooses to decline any offer that is not based on these fundamentals. Therefore, it is also necessary for her to have the possibility to become acquainted with the man courting her. It can thus be argued that she belongs to the less conventional view that emerged around the mid-eighteenth century that saw marriage as a union based upon mutual feelings of love.

## **Marriage**

In eighteenth-century England, women depended greatly upon their husbands for subsistence. Marriage was the foundation that would salvage them from the arduous life that awaited a maiden woman and for this reason it was not always expected be able to marry for love. A single woman was very fortunate to find any type of work at all. If she was well educated, she could generally become either a school-teacher or a governess, both of which, however, were commonly regarded as the mere prolonging of servant duties. Some women found a well-off cousin to marry and were then seen as very fortunate, as they had been rescued from a miserable future as unmarried women (Wollstonecraft 110). Despite such an opportunity given to Elizabeth by her cousin, Mr Collins, in his proposal to her, she firmly marks her disinterest in becoming his wife. Thereby, it is implied that she has greater expectations on marriage, which impede her to

marry only due to the mere convenience of an accord. Shortly after his failed attempt with Elizabeth, Mr Collins instead asks her good friend Charlotte Lucas for her hand instead, and Ms Lucas is quick to accept. In contrast to Elizabeth, she represents a woman who swiftly seizes such an opportunity. When Jane and Bingley's mutual attraction becomes publicly known, she says to Elizabeth that she believes Jane to have a good chance at happiness if she marries him, something which according to her "...in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (16).

The two young women's diverging approaches to the matter are made more evident by Elizabeth's reaction to Charlotte's engagement to Mr Collins. She is much surprised by the news and finds it difficult to believe. Charlotte replies by explaining that she is not a romantic person and that all she asks for in life is a comfortable home. She further adds, "I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (85). Considering Elizabeth's sceptical attitude to the situation, it is possible to analyse Charlotte Lucas's character as her counterpart as to different opinions on matrimony. The prospect of their marriage is inexplicable to Elizabeth. She sees no justification in her friend's decision to become Mrs Collins, despite Jane's attempts to remind her of the eligibility of the match for Miss Lucas, who is from a large and not very rich family. However, it does not appease Elizabeth, who remains upset and declares that by marrying him, Charlotte chooses security over happiness and that is in her view, something indefensible (92). This presents an image of Elizabeth as a rather romantic woman, who intends to wait to marry until she finds a partner that she truly esteems and loves and with whom she will lead an honestly happy life, even if it would mean facing less economically secure living conditions.

It was suggested in conduct manuals of this time that a wife was inherently submissive to her husband. The husband admittedly had his imperfections, but these were only minor exceptions to his otherwise positive male authority. It was therefore generally justified as but a small injustice to submit the wife to his command, rather than enterprising the entire institution of marriage "upon which the Order of Humane Society [did] so much depend" (Savile 19). In addition to submissiveness and obedience, wives were also advised to develop their ability to use female charm to calm down their husbands when necessary (Brophy 147). Despite these requisites of a good wife, a good husband was not to misuse his authority. The intention of the promoted male power was

not to generate a reign of fear (Savile 21), it was just the consequence of the general contemporary idea that women were “the weaker vessel” (Wollstonecraft 55). In fact, a married woman was to establish her place in society within the walls of her home, as the mistress of the household. Following the expansion of the English middle class during this period, it became common to employ maids and servants to perform the domestic duties. The duties left for the mistress were then more concerned with looking after the needs of the family and being at their disposition (Vickery 2-3). Her role was therefore to function as the manager of the family and household matters, in which case her role resembled that of her husband’s, as working gentlemen would order labourers and servants to perform the manual labour, rather than doing it themselves (Vickery 8-9).

In Elizabeth’s home, her father is the head authority and her mother is the manager of the household, according to the traditional roles. Mr Bennet does not abuse his position; instead he keeps a low profile, both as a father and as a husband. The parents’ marriage is depicted as rather tedious and lifeless. They are mostly described as doing things separately and it is obvious that Mr Bennet prefers to sit alone in his library and read rather than socializing with his wife. He himself makes an allusion to the flat state of their marriage when giving Elizabeth some advice on choosing a husband. He then says to her, “My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect our partner in life” (246). Mrs Bennet, on the other hand, is described as somebody who does not view marriage as primarily based upon the love between two people. She is very anxious to marry off her daughters and whether they really love the men in question does not seem essential. When Elizabeth turns down Mr Collins proposal, Mrs Bennet is devastated and becomes very upset with her for rejecting the offer, showing no consideration to whether Elizabeth has any warm feelings for Mr Collins or not (75-76). Moreover, Mrs Bennet is sincerely thrilled about Lydia and Mr Wickham’s wedding, despite the fact that it is evident to everyone that he is not in love with Lydia (198).

So even if the husband and wife’s functional roles are clear between Mr and Mrs Bennet and they both respect each other’s position in the family, they do not appear to have developed the kind of respect that comes as the result of true love between spouses. This indifference seems to be what Elizabeth wishes to avoid, by insisting to wait to marry until she finds a man who she loves. She thereby shows that she is looking for a marriage in which the emotional life between the husband and the wife is not as

discordant and listless as that of her parents. In contrast to her mother's reaction, she is appalled by Lydia and Wickham's engagement, because it is evident that it is a union that is not based upon their mutual love for one another and that they for this reason will not be happy (206).

In the first half of the eighteenth century, there were various theories claiming that parental care and discipline should permeate a husband's relationship to his wife and that in a marriage "it should suffice that the women don't contradict their Lords and Masters, that they tamely submit and bear with patience what is imposed on them" (Brophy 142). As mentioned earlier, the ideal shifted towards the middle of the century from this point of view to one regarding marriage as a union based on intellectual companionship and respect (Brophy 126). Conduct manuals from the latter half of the century were then more inclined to endorse such opinions. Accordingly, the following advice was given to women to consider before marrying:

There is one advice I shall leave you, to which I beg your particular attention. [...] [E]xamine your tempers, your tastes and your hearts, very severely, and settle in your own minds, what are the requisites to your happiness in a married state; and as it is almost impossible that you should get every thing you wish, come to a steady determination what you are to consider as essential, and what may be sacrificed. (Gregory 52)

Compared to what had earlier been the general idea about marriage, Elizabeth's ideals can be understood to adhere to the later attitude: throughout the novel, she refuses any man who does not invoke the right feelings in her. When her aunt and uncle take her to see the Pemberley estate during their tour of the Lakes, she displays her disappointment over the fact that she could have been mistress of such a wonderful estate, had she only accepted Mr Darcy's proposal (159). However, it was not reason enough for her to marry him and she thereby shows her determination not to give up her beliefs and ideals, not even to become mistress of Pemberley, with such extraordinary beauty, charm and reputation. This reveals a character with integrity and self respect. It depicts a woman who is not willing to settle for anything less than what will make her genuinely happy, despite the unsecure future of the unmarried women of her time. It can thus be said that

her view on marriage is in accordance with the newer view that had begun to be advocated in the later part of the century, rather than with the earlier opinions.

## **Conclusion**

The characters in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are described in a manner which depicts them all as unique individuals. However, one character in particular is the focus of this essay: Elizabeth Bennet. As the main female protagonist of the novel, she displays features of a rather self-confident young woman. This makes her an appealing subject for further analysis, as it makes her character appear as somewhat of an unconventional individual at first glance. It is therefore interesting to look at the accuracy of the claim that she should be entirely unconventional, by seeing how her behaviour and manners conform to the contemporary, generally advocated modes of conduct. In the attempt to determine this, she has here been analysed in relation to three areas that are claimed to have been of significance in eighteenth-century women's lives: accomplishments, courtship and marriage. As the analysis developed, it eventually became evident that the other central characters helped shape the portrayal of Elizabeth, by each representing contrastive contemporary attitudes on the subject of female comportment.

It is clear from her relaxed attitude towards her own education that she regards the enhancement of qualities such as naturalness and grace as equally important as acquiring accomplishments. Both the Bingley sisters and her sister, Mary, represent women that focus too much on ornamental accomplishments, at the cost of neglecting the development of their personalities. To Elizabeth, this makes them appear conceited. It is also clear that she does not believe there to be *any* woman as complete as the conduct manuals suggest. In this regard, it is possible to claim that she is not representative of a typical woman of her time, because of her rejection of the contemporary image of the accomplished woman. Her approach to love also differs somewhat from the traditional view. However, around the middle of the eighteenth century many conduct manuals began to challenge the conventional view on love. In such case, deviating behaviour on

Elizabeth's behalf can actually reflect the writings of this newer generation of manuals, making her appear more avant-garde.

She is clever enough not to fall for men like Mr Wickham, who repudiates honesty and allows deceit to get the better of him. Nor does she allow herself to marry unless it will increase her chance of happiness, despite jeopardizing her chance at a secure home. She thereby proves to have the integrity not to renounce her happiness for security, like Charlotte Lucas does. This also indicates an awareness of her self-worth, which apparently not all women were courageous enough to acknowledge, in fear of facing a future as penniless maiden women. Lady Catherine's recurring personal attacks towards Elizabeth add to show that she really is a mistress over herself. She does not let herself be convinced that she should be any less respectable merely because of her faulty list of accomplishments or lower social status. Such self-control was regarded as a very virtuous character trait.

Throughout the analysis, there is continuous focus on Elizabeth's virtuous character and how well it serves her under various circumstances. In this regard, I therefore find it fair to claim her as being described quite well in accordance with Austen's contemporary advocated mode of conduct. On the other hand, I have noticed that she sometimes acts less according to what was generally expected from a young woman of her time. Therefore, to claim that Jane Austen is attempting to portray an altogether unconventional woman is to overlook how exceptionally well Elizabeth Bennet's virtuous character actually complies with the expected comportment of her time.

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