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THE UNCONVENTIONAL COURTSHIP BETWEEN ELIZABETH  
BENNET AND MR DARCY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND  
PREJUDICE*  
BA thesis

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## ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I am going to discuss the unconventional courtship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. I have chosen the novel *Pride and Prejudice* as my basis for the thesis as Jane Austen reflects how people lived their social life during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century England in it. The purpose of the paper is to find out the following: what are the rules of social etiquette and how the rules are followed between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy in Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

The thesis consists of four parts: the introduction, the theoretical part, the practical part and the conclusion. The introduction provides the background of the study. The first chapter of the thesis is the theoretical part, describing how eighteenth and nineteenth century England's social rules were applied. The second chapter focuses on the analysis of the rules applied in Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The analysis focuses on the three main rules: introduction, cards and calling and marriage. The thesis concludes with the summarization of the main findings.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PP *Pride and Prejudice*

## INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's novels are the epitome of the centuries she lived in. She is declared to be the 'most thoroughly English' writer (see Sales 1996: 11). Her novels reflect the rural England of the Regency era. These novels dwell not only on romantic stories but on the history of the Regency era. Describing how the people of society lived “in an ambiance of cultivated politeness” and “well balanced common sense” (see Watkins 1990: 7). Austen wrote from her experience, what she saw and put pieces of her life into the pages of her books and characters.

*Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1817, but it is not known when the novel was actually written or in how long a period of time. While reading the novel the reader can notice the social themes of reputation and class which can be linked to the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. The rules of society and etiquette were no more than a model of expectations and every human reacted to them in different ways. These were norms which were accepted as 'the right thing to do' for those who saw themselves within the society. (see Davidoff 1973: 17)

In my thesis I will be discussing a few rules of the social etiquette of the Regency era in England. I have chosen the novel *Pride and Prejudice* as my basis for the thesis as Austen has reflected the rules of the Regency society in her characters – Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. I will proceed to finding examples of unconventional courtship applying close reading in historical context. I am going to analyze how the rules of society are reflected on the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*.

## 1 THE SOCIAL ETIQUETTE OF THE REGENCY ERA

For my main source for the thesis I chose Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (2012). The novel touches on the themes of love, reputation and social class. I used the novel to see how Elizabeth's and Darcy's unconventional courtship came together.

Austen's novels which take place in the Regency era provide an insight into how people then lived. She wrote of what she saw, experienced and with whom she met and knew. Austen shared her people's thoughts about the era in her letters to her brother, speaking about 'marriage, property, social differences, and of the kind of behaviour which was seen as proper for ladies and gentlemen' (Mason 1982: 70-71). Philip Mason writes in his book *The English Gentleman: The Rise and Fall of an Ideal* (1982) that Austen writes from the point of view of a lesser gentry and her thoughts on love are blended with her ideas on elegance and principle.

The Regency era belongs in the years 1811 – 1820. These are the years in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland when King George III was deemed unfit to rule and as his heir, his son was made Prince Regent. The era during which King George III ruled the United Kingdom is also known as the Georgian period. (Sales 1996: xv) Even though the era changed, its social etiquette did not. Deidre Le Faye in her book *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels* (2002) gives different points of Austen's life which can be paralleled with the book, helping to have an understanding of the Regency era. Prince Regent still followed the rules of etiquette which applied to both the ladies and the gentlemen. In his book *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1996), Robert Sales writes about the topic of Regency England in Austen novels which gives a great insight of how life then was.

The novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (PP), was written and set between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Georgian era slowly changed into the Regency era from

1811 lasting through the new period (Sales 1996: xv). During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, social status was determined by family connections, how much land the family-owned and what their annual income was (Worsley 2018: 45-46). Suddenly more people were trying to get into "society," and wanted to socialize with people in the upper class. (Pool 1993: 66) Marriages were extremely important for women as marriage helped to enlarge their sphere of influence. Potentially suitable partners were to be met at balls and dances, where ladies were to dance more than with one partner to ensure possible new family alliances (Davidoff 1973: 49-50).

The social etiquette was not given by choice, but by birth. Therefore, it created barriers between other levels of society. "The most ceremonial behaviour was requested for those times in the life cycle which have, in all cultures, been used to mark 'rites de passage'... birth, coming of age, marriage and death. The other sensitive area ruled by etiquette was the introduction of the new individuals and families into group membership and activities." (Davidoff 1973: 41). In her book *The Best Circles: Society, the Season and Etiquette* (1973), Leonore Davidoff focuses on the rules of society.

In those days, introductions were very important. In her book *Jane Austen's Women: An Introduction* (2018) Kathleen Anderson has written elaborately on different Austen characters. She shares her thoughts and points of view on supremacy in *Pride and Prejudice*. When making introductions, the inferior person was always introduced to the superior, as the rank always took precedence. Ideally, the superior person was asked beforehand whether he/she wanted to be introduced. This way the lower social groups were kept beneath the higher class. Therefore, introducing became social approval as it was not desirable to be introduced or introduce everybody. Consequently, people had to choose very carefully who to introduce and

to whom. (Davidoff 1973: 41) However, functionaries like clergymen and doctors could not introduce themselves as they were considered a party who had to be introduced by a third party (Davidoff 1973: 42). Although, it was usual that introductions required a third person who was acquainted with both parties, visiting new people was the only exception when it was acceptable to introduce yourself to a stranger without a third party (Kelly 2018: 141). Helena Kelly's book *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical* (2018) brings out her different thoughts and points of view on the Bennet family and Mr Darcy. According to Kelly (2018: 140), visiting someone involved going to a house and leaving your card, after which you might expect to be admitted to see the master or mistress. Visiting someone was a silent declaration of deeming yourself socially equal to host/hostess and by returning the visit, the person was agreeing with that assessment (Kelly 2018: 140).

Invitations to assemblies and dinners were received as a ceremonial card. The latter was seen as flattering as only selected people were invited. Dinners were like an afternoon prelude to an evening at the theatre and demanded great social skills because dinners were more secluded and done with a proper selection of guests. Once you were invited to the home of the hostess no further introduction was considered necessary. (Davidoff 1973: 41) Social recognition could also be 'cut' if a higher status party did not want to continue the relationship. However, servants and functionaries could not 'cut' acquaintances even if they wanted to. (Davidoff 1973: 42)

As personal visits became more popular, so did the custom to leave your card. (Davidoff 1973: 43) The calling card and the 'morning calls' served as a nice way to keep these social aspirants forever at a distance, at least to hold them off for a while and perhaps to screen those who would be allowed an entrée from those who would not (Pool 1993: 66). The wife could deputize her husband by leaving his card, while grown-up daughters accompanying their mother

had their names printed underneath the card. “Card leaving, however, was not synonymous with calling. It was rather a system of feeling the social climate before taking action.” (Davidoff 1973: 43). Usually, the suitable time of the return visit and leaving a card was a week to ten days after receiving the card. (Davidoff 1973: 43) There was a strict protocol following how to leave a card when you came to town, a person drove around with their footman to the houses of those they wished to notify of their presence. “At each house, the footman took a small card bearing your name and two cards of your husband's (yours for the mistress of the house and one of his for both the master and the mistress) and gave them to the butler, who would put them on a salver inside the front hall or, in less fancy establishments, perhaps on the mantelpiece. Visitors then had a chance to see whom the family numbered among its social circle and be suitably impressed.” (Pool 1993: 66) If the card was not returned, the receiver was simply not interested in the acquaintance. (Davidoff 1973: 43)

Calls were made on ceremonial occasions and they were also used as an acknowledgement of hospitality. Acknowledgements were made three days after attending a ball or other entertainment. There were three types of ‘morning calls’ which had their own official timetable with marked ceremonial calls, semi-ceremonial calls and intimate calls. In BBC documentary *Jane Austen: Behind Closed Doors* historian Lucy Worsley explains that morning calls were paid in morning rooms. If you were not acquainted with the person you were visiting, it was named “courtesy call”. (BBC 2017) Etiquette stressed that “courtesy calls” were to be held short and conversation light. If you were calling purely for the sake of formality, you were expected to stay no more than fifteen minutes, and your call could be returned merely with a card. (Pool 1993: 68) Sometimes unmarried men paid their calls on Sundays which were seen as more of a pitiful duty as paying calls were more of a woman's duty. (Davidoff 1973: 43-44)

However, men did not receive calls from ladies, unless those ladies were of dubious reputation. There was also a very strict rule that no lady can ever call on a gentleman except upon a business or professional matter (Pool 1993: 69). If there were daughters living at the home one might leave separate cards for them and for any guests of the household, too. If one was calling with an unmarried daughter or daughters in tow, they did not generally leave cards of their own but wrote their name or names under a name on the card before handing it to the footman to be delivered. If one decided to call for the first time, they took the risk of rejection that they would not when you merely left a card. (Pool 1993: 67) Then they would not have to put up with humiliation. Daniel Pool's *What Jane Austen ate and Charles Dickens knew* (1993) gives an insight into the complicated world of social rules and ways of living with a little humorous twist.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, marriages were not arranged anymore, but the choice was made individually. Thus, balls and dances became very important means through which people could meet and mingle and where girls were introduced into society. (Davidoff 1973: 49) Dancing was the main way in which young people could meet “in a respectable and carefully chaperoned environment” (Le Faye 2002: 103). The individual choice had to be regulated precisely to ensure the exclusion of undesirable partners and maximum gain for both sides. (Davidoff 1973: 49) Rules were to be followed strictly. A girl was not to dance more than three dances with one partner or sit out a dance with a young man which was to ensure control over new family alliances made through marriage. (Davidoff 1973: 50) If the time was right for engagement, the formal proposal was addressed in a letter to the parent or guardian. Until 1823, a man or woman under the age of twenty-one could not marry without parental permission. After 1823, a boy was legally able to marry without consent at age fourteen and a girl when she turned twelve. (Pool, 1993: 180) It was considered proper for young people to acknowledge their parents’ wishes and

thoughts on suitors and marriage proposals. (Watkins 1990: 24) After receiving the formal letter of proposal and acceptance, the negotiations on the marriage settlement began. How much or what partners could bring into the marriage has to be settled beforehand. Marriages were sealed by a licence from the archbishop. (Watkins 1990: 28) Susan Watkins in her *Jane Austen's Town and Country Style* (1990) makes the reader understand the complications of marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. In the 1800's the Church of England was the official state church, it had its own court system with virtually exclusive jurisdiction over wills, marriages, and divorces, and its members alone were eligible to attend Oxford and Cambridge (Pool 1993: 112,113). In addition to exercising general supervision over the church, the Archbishop of Canterbury had the right to grant special marriage licenses enabling one to get married anywhere at any time (Pool 1993: 114) It was the most expensive procedure as it cost twenty-eight guineas in the middle of the century—and would probably only be available to the well-connected since it was granted at the Archbishop's discretion (Pool 1993: 183). According to Pool (1993: 183) Lydia and Wickam are presumed to be married in Gretna Green in Scotland where they could marry under looser regulations of the Scotch Presbyterian church. In terms of a divorce, marriages were almost impossible to annul because only the wealthiest of men could afford it and even then it necessitated an Act of Parliament (Watkins 1990: 28). Until 1857, divorces were the exclusive concern of the Church of England, carried out at the Consistory Courts in Doctors' Commons in London (Pool 1993: 185). The Divorce Act of 1857 took jurisdiction over divorces away from the church courts and gave it to a new civil divorce court (Pool 1993: 186).

According to Davidoff (1973: 49), marriage was a social definition that provided new status through one partner and new capital through the other. For many years, virtually all of a

woman's property became her husband's by law upon marriage. His courtship was in some ways a career move in addition to finding a partner for life. Generally, when upper-class people got married, a wife brought a generous dowry with her as an inducement to marriage. The part of a woman's social duty was to enlarge her influence through marriage as well as it was the concern of the whole family because their financial future depended on marriage. (Watkins 1990: 24)

Getting ready for marriage did not come easily as in order to marry a girl must become an adult (Davidoff 1973: 51-52). To become an adult, the girl had to make a formal entrance into society which was called 'coming out'. Training for this formal entrance into society was done in London or Bath as young ladies learned to mingle with ease at the theatre, balls and other gatherings. (Watkins 1990: 23) Normally, the girls were seventeen or eighteen years old when presented to society (Davidoff 1973: 53). Girls had about two to three seasons of presenting to find a husband and if by then she was not at least engaged, she was seen as a failure. Seasons were the times when most balls or other gatherings were being held. When she got married, she emerged with a new status and social circle. The woman had to be presented again in the circles she moved in before marriage to set the seal on her new status. (Davidoff 1973: 50, 52, 53) In the nineteenth century marriage without love was not a big deal because money and social security played a bigger role. According to Watkins (1990: 24) being concerned about money was practical and if love was also present, the result was pure harmony. An even bigger problem was when a woman who did not get herself married within two to three seasons was deemed as a failure. A woman of thirty years was written off as a permanent spinster. (Pool 1993: 53) The spinster status was also a disappointment to the family. In *Jane Austen at Home (2017)* Lucy Worsley explains that the word "spinster" had also obtained a different meaning during the Georgian era, now defining a single woman. According to Lucy Worsley (2017), Austen calls reaching 27 years of age and older "the years of danger". (Worsley, 2018: 236)

In the next chapter, I will be looking at the differences between the concrete rules of society in the Regency era and Austen's vision which are reflected in the courtship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy.

## **2 THE UNCONVENTIONAL COURTSHIP OF ELIZABETH BENNET AND MR DARCY**

The heroine of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet is the second daughter of a family of five girls living at the Longbourn estate with her parents Mr and Mrs Bennet. One day a wealthy unmarried young man Mr Bingley rents the manor of Netherfield Park near the Longbourn estate, which causes quite a stir in the Bennet household and among other families with young unmarried daughters. The oldest sister Jane meets Mr Bingley at a ball which is held in the Netherfield manor close by to him. The ball is where Elizabeth and Mr Darcy first meet. Their first meeting goes without a formal introduction. At first glance, Elizabeth decides that she does not like Darcy because of his disrespectful actions towards her. Elizabeth and Darcy may have gotten off on the wrong foot but despite Elizabeth's efforts to keep him away, they grow more fond of each other every time they meet. When military officers are stationed in a nearby town, Elizabeth meets Mr Wickham who tells her a false story about Darcy which makes her despise Darcy even more. Soon Darcy expresses his love for her, but she cannot accept him for she still believes those false stories told by Wickham. Fate keeps trying to push Elizabeth and Darcy closer as he finally explains everything and they keep accidentally meeting. A while later, Darcy asks for Elizabeth's hand in marriage again and she finally accepts.

Even though Darcy keeps up his façade of indifference for a while, Elizabeth manages to break through to find a redeemable caring man who begins to show his true colours to her. Under the pride and ego hides a future viable husband for Elizabeth. Through all their arguing Elizabeth discovers, as does Darcy, that they are intelligent and interesting to talk to, which seemingly nurtures Darcy's spirit as other ladies are mostly vain and boring. He initially sees Elizabeth as an uncontrollable woman who is not suitable for marriage, but as the time passes

and their conversations grow longer, he begins to respect her thoughts and see her as a real woman not controlled by the rules of society.

## **Introduction**

Social introduction plays a great role in *Pride and Prejudice*. As it is discussed in the previous chapter, the social etiquette of the Regency period had a very strict set of rules which everybody had to follow with no exceptions. The novel's first few chapters concentrate on the Bennets trying to get invited to the Netherfield manor where a young unmarried man has settled in. Mrs Bennet is unable to begin the introduction herself because women cannot pay ceremonial calls to single men, so the one to start an acquaintance should be Mr Bennet. By refusing to call on Mr Bingley, Mr Bennet is indicating that he is not allowing his wife and five daughters to socialize with Mr Bingley. (Kelly 2018: 140, 141)

Elizabeth's and Darcy's relationship does not have a great start as Darcy is rude to her behind her back. The bigger problem is that they are not even properly introduced. Introduction was a crucial requirement of social etiquette in the Regency period. When the Bennets are invited to the dance at the Netherfield Park, Mr Bingley offers Darcy the possibility that he can let Elizabeth's sister introduce them, but he rudely says no and says Elizabeth to be “/.../ tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; /.../” which is an insult to her desirability. (PP 12) The socially inferior person is always introduced to the socially superior one. In this case the inferior is Elizabeth Bennet, the superior Darcy. Even though Elizabeth and Darcy both belong to the gentry, Darcy owns more money and land. According to Anderson (2018: 53), Elizabeth pushes back against Darcy's every presumption of superiority as she keeps showing distaste. Secondly, Elizabeth has not been introduced to Mr Bingley, so he cannot introduce her

to Darcy as he does not know her. According to Pool (1993: 55), a gentleman is always introduced to a lady as it is presumed to be an honour for the gentleman to meet her. But as Darcy himself does not want to be introduced, it shows his superiority and that meeting her will not be an honour for him. Also, by abiding that rule, Jane will not be able to introduce her sister to Darcy. The only one who could introduce Elizabeth to Darcy is Jane, but it is actually unclear in the novel if Jane has been introduced to Darcy. Otherwise, she could not introduce them, because the introducer has to be acquainted with both parties which clashes with the rule 'a gentleman is always introduced to a lady'. Elizabeth is hurt after their first informal meeting as she confides to her sisters and Miss Lucas “/.../ and I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine.” (PP 20)

The second time they meet is at William Lucas's house. The Bennets have gone to Sir William Lucas's to converse about the last evening at Netherfield ball. Mr Darcy is also present and observes Elizabeth carefully. According to Austen (PP 23-24), as Darcy is observing Elizabeth, he begins to wish to know more about her. Elizabeth is conversing with Miss Lucas and Colonel Foster when Charlotte notices Darcy's approach. Bearing in mind that they have not yet been introduced, Elizabeth turns to him and talks. As Sir William encourages the two to dance, Elizabeth stands her ground as she will not dance with a man who hurt her pride during the first ball they both attended. Darcy may have money and all the great aspects a woman in need of a husband desires, Elizabeth continues to push against his superiority by denying his hand twice (Anderson 2018: 53), which shows disrespect towards her superiors.

They meet again when Elizabeth decides to walk to Netherfield to visit her sister who is staying there due to falling ill during a rainy-day ride there. Still, Darcy and Elizabeth are not introduced to each other and dine with the Bingleys. During Elizabeth's stay at Netherfield, they

begin to talk, which should not be possible as they have not been introduced. Darcy cannot stop himself from arguing with her about poetry, music, other people and themselves (Kelly 2018: 151). It is much more like disputing than talking, which the social rules about superior and inferior people are against (Anderson 2018: 53).

Another assembly is held sometime after Elizabeth's sister Jane has recovered from her illness. This time Mr Collins attends the ball at Netherfield as well. They share a few dances, but suddenly Darcy addresses Elizabeth for his application for her hand. During the assembly, Mr Collins decides to introduce himself to Darcy. He speaks to Elizabeth about his intentions and she is troubled. Collins thinks himself capable of introducing himself because of his association with Lady Catherine who as the novel later on reveals is Darcy's aunt. Elizabeth tries to dissuade him from falling into disrepute.

“/.../ assuring him that Mr Darcy would consider his addressing him without introduction as an impertinent freedom, rather than a compliment to his aunt; that it was not in the least necessary there should be any notice on either side, and that if it were, it must belong to Mr. Darcy, the superior in consequence, to begin the acquaintance.” (PP 98)

Therefore, Mr Collins replies that he believes “the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom” (PP 68) which is actually false as clergymen were below superior ranking (Davidoff 1973: 42). The fact shows that Mr Collins does not care for the rules. As the rules say that only a person of superior rank could introduce him- or herself to lower ranks and as Mr Collins is of a low rank, the introduction by his hand is seen as rude. This is surprising since he seems to spend much time with Lady Catherine who is supposed to be the ‘epitome’ of the social norms.

## **Cards and calls**

In those days, cards and calls played an important role in getting invited to visit one's home or getting an invitation to balls. In the first chapter of the novel, Mrs Bennet announces the arrival of a new neighbour with a large fortune. She is determined to suit him to one of her daughters but to do that Mr Bennet must pay him a visit and introduce himself. Usually leaving a card or paying a call was a woman's duty who could leave her husband's card. (Davidoff 1973: 43) For some reason, Mrs Bennet did not want to visit herself. I can only speculate that she wants her husband to go because he was born a gentleman and Mrs Bennet is of lower social status. Mr Bennet is quite old and does not have that kind of energy. He secretly goes to Netherfield and makes acquaintance with Mr Bingley which comes as a great surprise to his wife and daughters. He takes quite a risk by going there for the first time to pay a call, as by doing that he risks being rejected. If he had left a card, the humiliation would be much smaller if the card is not returned. (Pool 1993: 67) In a few days Mr Bingley returns Mr Bennet's visit. The acceptable time of the return visit was a week to ten days after the first visit. If the visit was not returned, it showed that the receiver was simply not interested in the acquaintance. (Davidoff 1973: 43) Now it is possible to invite the family to the assembly which Mr Bingley is holding in his manor.

As both the Bingleys and the Bennets have been acquainted, they are to visit each other. In Chapter 17, the Bingles come to Longbourn to give their personal invitation for the next expected ball at Netherfield. According to Pool (1993: 78), invitations were sent out three to six weeks in advance by the lady of the house. As the book continues, we know Mr Bingley travels with his sister, which makes her the lady of the house.

When Mr Collins marries Miss Lucas they move to Hunsford in Kent which is located close to Lady Catherine de Bough. He always speaks very highly of Lady Catherine. She selected Mr Collins to be her parish's clergyman (PP 64). By choosing Mr Collins to be her parish's clergyman, she is deciding to be his patron (Pool 1993: 116). It seems that her being his patron makes him feel indebted to Lady Catherine as Mr Collins continues to speak of her and seek praise from her through the entire book. As Elizabeth goes for a visit to Hunsford, Lady Catherine invites them to Rosings for dinner. The one to introduce Elizabeth is Charlotte as she knows her the best and has already been acquainted with Her Ladyship. She is the third party in this case, although Mr Collins should be the one to introduce Elizabeth as he is her cousin and in close acquaintanceship with Lady Catherine. Darcy being her nephew, so after a long time, he and Elizabeth meet again at Rosings.

On the one hand, they seem to know and follow the rules of society but on the other hand, they seem to do as they want, for example when Mr Bennet goes to introduce himself risking being turned away which of course would have ended badly for his daughters.

## **Marriage**

Throughout the book, the heroine Elizabeth receives altogether three proposals of marriage. The last of which she finally accepts. It was not entirely common for a woman to receive more than one proposal in her lifetime or in Elizabeth's situation, in one year. Denying a secure life with a household to run and with a man to support the family could easily backfire as a woman may not have had another chance of materially securing her life in the future. As Austen writes (PP 126), Elizabeth is astonished that her best friend Miss Lucas's opinion about matrimony is completely different from her own. She is a young woman who wants to marry

for love and wants to spend her life with the chosen man, not let money ruin her chances for happiness like Charlotte does.

The very first proposal is made at the beginning of the novel when Mr Collins sees Elizabeth as a suitable spouse (PP 111). Mr Collins, as a distant relative to Mr Bennet, is due to inherit Longbourn, the Bennet family estate, following the death of Mr. Bennet. As Mr Bennet does not have any male heirs himself, the estate goes to a male next in line. Which is why Mrs Bennet expresses her anger when Elizabeth turns down the proposal. When it comes to the proper proposal, the man is supposed to give notice of his intention to the future bride's father or guardian. However, Mr Collins does not ask for Mr Bennet's permission for Elizabeth's hand in marriage, but rather asks for her mother's approval. The fact that Mr Collins has not asked for Mr Bennet's permission shows that he does not recognize the rules as the woman of the household was not the head of the house or family. Besides that, it shows his great disrespect towards the head of the family.

Elizabeth Bennet's mother, Mrs Bennet, is very adamant to find a husband for her daughters (PP 5). She has five daughters and finding men for all of them is to be every mother's nightmare. After Elizabeth's refusal of Mr Collins's proposal, she points out to Elizabeth every possible outcome that could happen to the family because she did not accept Mr Collins's hand (PP 114). The future of the family depends on how successful their daughters' marriages are. Mrs Bennet is terribly angry at Elizabeth for turning down Mr Collins's proposal because it could have prevented the horror of her and her daughters having to leave Longbourn after Mr Bennet's death. In those days, the wife never inherited the home, because the house always went to a male heir next in line. As Mr and Mrs Bennet only have daughters, the inheritance of the

estate goes to the first in line male heir who is Mr Collins. Mr Collins reminds Elizabeth that he is proposing for the future of her family.

“But the fact is, that being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father, /.../ I could not satisfy myself without resolving to chuse a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place” (PP 107)

As Mr Collins lists the reasons why Elizabeth should accept his hand in marriage, not one of the reasons is love. He does not love her. Mr Collins only thinks Elizabeth will make a great wife for him “/.../ I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness” (PP 106). Elizabeth turns it down quickly which Mr Collins first took to be normal for women to do after the first proposal as he thinks them to be melodramatic. “You could never make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so.” (PP 108). Mr Collins does not like the attitude and fierceness with which Elizabeth rejects him and decides to take the proposal back, as in his eyes women are not to be independent.

“/.../ she is really headstong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogheter be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state. /.../ perhaps it were better not to force her into accepting me,” (PP 111)

Although, he cannot leave empty-handed as Lady Catherine de Bourgh expects him to bring home a spouse as he so heartedly declares (PP 106). Mr Collins admires Lady Catherine adamantly and disappointing her is out of the question. Miss Charlotte Lucas, who is Elizabeth’s best friend and neighbour, illustrates the fearful concerns in women of the nineteenth century as a twenty-seven-year-old unmarried woman, who in a few years will be considered as a spinster (Pool 1993: 53) in the eyes of the society.

She tells Elizabeth:

“I am not a 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 marriage state.” (PP 126)

Marriage gives Miss Lucas a chance for social connections, a secure home and financial security even though the marriage is without love. She uses marriage as a comfort which was probably done by most women. As Austen writes (PP 126), Elizabeth is distressed for her friend for having humiliated herself and choosing worldly advantage over feeling. They had never shared the same feelings about matrimony, but Elizabeth does not think it possible for Miss Lucas to be tolerably happy with the chosen man. (PP 126) Like Charlotte confesses, “I ask only a comfortable home”, and continues to speak of Mr Collins's good connections which means that she had to stand up for herself and see she had a secure future (PP 126).

The second proposal comes in the second volume of the novel. Elizabeth is left alone as Mr Collins and his wife Charlotte Lucas had gone out. Suddenly, Darcy is there and bursts out a marriage proposal “/.../ You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” (PP 191). Darcy did not send a formal letter asking for a blessing from Mr Bennet, so it is done completely informally. Elizabeth, who has just learned the truth about the separation of her sister and Mr Bingley from Colonel Fitzwilliam, is visibly upset (PP 187). She takes the proposal to be offensive as Darcy expresses his repressed feelings for her. He makes a haughty remark about her family's social inferiority to him. Because Elizabeth is inferior to him, the marriage is not actually reasonable, as she does not have the necessary social standing and an adequate dowry to bring into the marriage.

“/.../ he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which judgement had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which /.../ was very unlikely to recommend his suit.” (PP 191)

He is rude and judgmental and proud enough to think he will “be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand.” (PP 191). The proposal is unacceptable for Elizabeth as she dislikes him so much, even more now as she knows the truth. And now when he proposes, he is still being arrogant as he confesses his love against his wishes “In vain have I struggled.” (PP 191) Darcy does not

even have an endorsement from her parents. And him emphasizing Elizabeth's social inferior position makes it even worse. Darcy cannot see why he is turned down as he is a gentleman in possession of a lot of money, land and great status. Elizabeth remarks, “she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer.”(PP 191).

The accusations towards breaking up Miss Bennet and Bingley make Darcy write a letter of explanation. Previously Mr Bingley jokingly explains that Darcy does not write “with ease” as he “studies too much for words of four syllables” (PP 48). But the letter Darcy writes is too long for too short a period of time to have been “studied” (PP 48, 198). Meaning it is written from the heart and Elizabeth understands that. (Kelly 2018: 151) After she finishes reading the letter and analyzing every word, she remarks “But vanity, not love, has been my folly /.../ Till this moment, I never knew myself.” (PP 210).

In volume three, when the heroine’s love interest makes the final proposal, Darcy is a changed man. He is sweet to Elizabeth as he selflessly hurries to find and help out her eloped sister Lydia. Lydia decided to elope with Mr Wickham, but the eloping younger daughter puts the whole family in shame because eloping was seen as wrong. It also poses a threat to Jane’s and Elizabeth’s marriageability (Anderson 2018: 191). Mrs Bennet's hope to find dutiful and rich husbands to all daughters will be gone. Therefore, Darcy, who is still in love with Elizabeth and wants to help a woman who has fallen into the hands of Mr Wickham, rushes to the rescue. What is more, Darcy is overlooking her family's inferiority to him. He has put aside his arrogance and pride to show the woman he loves his truer self. Elizabeth is afraid that this incident will pull them apart even more “and never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain.” (PP 279) as she could not apprehend that he is in love.

Before Mr Bingley and Darcy arrive at Loungborn to let Darcy speak of his affection towards Elizabeth, the latter gets an unannounced visitor – Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Darcy’s aunt comes to demand Elizabeth to decline the hand of marriage to his nephew. Lady Catherine does not support the marriage as Elizabeth is of lower social status and besides, Darcy was promised to Lady Catherine's daughter at his birth. “This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr Darcy is engaged to my daughter.” (PP 355) Engagements at infancy were quite common amongst higher folk, as it made sure the wealth and status stayed in the family. Getting approval from a socially higher person also opened a door to high society. By not approving, the doors will be closed around Elizabeth. Although marriages were not arranged any more in the nineteenth century, Lady Catherine was so-called 'old school'. By pointing out the social status of Elizabeth's mother, she is holding herself and Darcy to be superior and Elizabeth not equally worthy of him. Lady Catherine represents the older generation who arranged marriages and always looked down on socially inferior people, but for Elizabeth the times had changed.

“/.../ He is a gentleman, I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal.”

“True. You are a gentleman's daughter. But who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? “

“Whatever my connections may be,” said Elizabeth, “if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you.”(PP 357)

This is the moment of truth for both Darcy and Elizabeth. She thanks him for everything he has done for her family's honour and for saving her sister Lydia from grave disgrace. Darcy admits he did it out of a desire to give happiness to her. “I thought only of you,” he says (PP 367). He wants to know if she still dislikes him or whether her feelings towards him have changed since the proposal. Elizabeth lets him know that “her sentiments had undergone so material a change” since then. Darcy's happiness is great. She sees that he is “violently in love” with her while she is listening to the outpouring of his feelings for her.

When Jane first hears about the engagement, she does not believe that this is true love as she tells her “do anything rather than marry without affection.” (PP 374) which Elizabeth quickly debunks as she tells Jane about everything that has happened since Pemberley. When Darcy comes back to Longbourn in the morning with Mr Bingley, they make a plan to ask for Elizabeth’s parents’ consent. As mentioned above, a formal marriage proposal was addressed in a letter to a parent or guardian, but Darcy and Elizabeth plan to do it personally (Watkins 1990: 24). Mr Bennet and Mrs Bennet have completely different opinions on a 'happy' marriage. Mr Bennet points out the materialistic side which he thinks is the incentive. He worries and advises her to think about her position as she has to esteem her husband as he is socially superior to her. He fears it might be unequal, but each has come to admire and respect the other (Kelly 2018: 152). As Kelly (2018: 152) remarks that Elizabeth's and Darcy's relationship begins with a refusal to accept social inequality, it ends with it too.

The next obstacle is Mrs Bennet who has expressed her dislike for Darcy before. Mrs Bennet is the complete opposite to Mr Bennet. She does not care about social differences or whether Elizabeth loves him or not. All she thinks about is wealth and a better life for her daughter and herself. As Austen writes (PP 379), “how rich and how great you will be! /.../ What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have!” it is all it takes to make a mother of five daughters glad. Marriages were sealed by a licence from the bishop. As Darcy is a man of great wealth, he can afford a special marriage licence, as Mrs Bennet declared “You must and shall be married by a special licence” (PP 379). By affording a special licence the engaged couple could marry with short notice. The novel does not show how the two of them eventually get married. All the reader knows is that the two of them are in a happy marriage, Elizabeth lives lavishly and they are never left alone by the Bennets.

## CONCLUSION

Regency England has increasingly been rediscovered as an age of refinement and elegance. Austen is used to promote the idea and ideals of Englishness. She lets us get a glimpse of the world of keen delicate sensibility, well balanced common sense and cultivated politeness as well as how people performed in a selection of social settings. Her writing is not only based on romance and lets the reader discover the world of rural England and the society of people trying to make something of themselves in the world where social rank defined everything they did.

Following rules promised to make a better society and it was a given that everybody should know and follow them accordingly. It seemed that without rules, there would be chaos. It was important that people knew how to make a proper introduction, how to lead up to it by sending cards to the house or making a call, and how to prepare for a proposal and if the marriage was allowed and appropriate.

The actions of the main characters changed so much that by the end of the novel both of them are completely new people. Elizabeth opens her eyes to see the caring and devoted person that Darcy is, and Darcy puts his prejudices aside and accepts love for love. The novel covers both worlds: the old and the new. Elizabeth, Darcy and other younger characters represent the new society which would not always obey the rules; the Bennets, Lady Catherine and others represent the old society stuck in the past.

Austen's novels portray the social norms seen by her. She wrote from her perspective as a woman. The reader can feel Austen herself in the character Elizabeth who fights back against the ridiculous rules which disunite inferior from superior.

As a result of the research of the Regency era's historical context and the close reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, I have discovered that Elizabeth Bennet's and Darcy's courtship is exceptional to other characters in the novel. Firstly, despite the fact that they are not introduced to each other accordingly, they continue to form a relationship and continue to speak to one another. Darcy is given the chance to properly acquaint himself to Elizabeth but he refuses. Taking into account that Elizabeth is socially lower ranked, she is not allowed to speak to him because of social etiquette. The card leaving and calling seems uncalled for as the characters seem to have forgotten that rule completely. Mr Bennet goes and introduces himself and his family to Mr Bingley risking being turned away which could be easily avoided by sending a card. Austen is seemingly toying with the idea of marriage as Elizabeth gets altogether three marriage proposals which definitely was not common. Elizabeth is not an average woman as she is courageous enough to decline two of them. According to custom, marriages were not based on love but on dowry and on hopes for a secure future. Austen reflects that kind of insecurity in Elizabeth's friend Miss Lucas who marries for a secure future and home.

In conclusion, Elizabeth and Darcy's courtship is unconventional which does not reflect the proper society of the Regency era.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Sigrid Mölder**

**The unconventional courtship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice**

**Elizabeth Benneti ja Mr Darcy ebaharilik kurameerimine Jane Austeni romaanis *Uhkus ja Eelarvamus***

**Bakalaureusetöö**

**2020**

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Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida Jane Austeni karakterite Elizabeth Benneti ja Mr. Darcy ebaharilikku kurameerimist tema romaanis *Uhkus ja Eelarvamus*. Antud töö põhieesmärk on uurida kaheksateistkümnenda sajandi lõpu ja üheksateistkümnenda sajandi alguse tekstinäidete põhjal, kui erinev on raamatus romantiseeritud käitumine tegeliku eluga.

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Märksõnad: Jane Austen, *Uhkus ja Eelarvamus*, ajalooline kirjandus, sotsiaalsed normid, regendistiil

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