

“Pride, Prejudice, and Power”

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “virtue” in a variety of ways. It can mean “chastity,” “morality,” “strength,” “power,” or “masculinity.” There is an inherent dichotomy in these definitions: virtue can mean chastity, the basis of pure womanhood, or it can mean manliness. To discern the most accurate reading of the word, it is important to examine its root in Latin, which is “virtus,” meaning power. A man inherently has more power in a patriarchal society such as the one that the British author, Austen, wrote in. Thus the struggle between the definitions becomes a struggle between men and women to become equals in the power to change their own lives for the better. Austen’s Pride and Prejudice is not only about the characteristics its title suggests, but it is about this another “p” word, power; especially it is about the power a woman can have in the institution of marriage. The importance of the marriage economy and keeping wealth in its established place was very important in 19th century Britain, and the lives of all women were affected by societal demands to marry well, and to marry for money. The virtues of chastity and manners led them to good marriages in this sense, because these two characteristics gave them to find husbands who would generally support their social standing. However, Austen argues that there is a virtue more important than can be seen on the surface, and that is morality and inner strength – which is the true source of happiness for a woman. She believes that in order to achieve this happiness a woman must transform herself into a self-confident and intelligent woman with the power to win a husband as an equal – someone who will not view her as merely a piece of property, but as a human being because of her moral and virtuous character. In this sense a person’s – whether a man or a woman- virtue can be

“rewarded” by the value of his or her power and morality in a happy marriage, rather than the wealth of his or her family or estate.

The marriage economy is undoubtedly very important for the upper middle class women in Austen’s time and she shows the various circumstances of conflicts of interest and virtue to the reader and Elizabeth to keep her from that path, so that Elizabeth will not merely sell herself, so to speak, to anyone. The first of these conflicts is Charlotte’s hasty marriage to Mr. Collins, so soon after Elizabeth rejects him because she feels she would not be happy with him. Charlotte accepts his request because she understands that she cannot expect anything better for herself. Austen, writing Elizabeth’s thoughts and thus showing her own to the reader, objects to this behavior:

She had always felt that Charlotte’s opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage. Charlotte the wife of Mr. Collins was a most humiliating picture!- And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen. (144-145)

Charlotte evidently has very practical and understandable reasons for marrying Mr. Collins, as unlikely a match it may seem to the reader to be. However, this is the exact reason Austen includes their marriage in the novel, because Charlotte “sacrifices” her values and compromises her personality in order to secure a future for her family and herself according to the system of marriage. Elizabeth thinks of this as humiliating and demeaning; in her mind, a woman should have more freedom than to be forced into marrying the first man with a stable income who proposes. Austen, through Elizabeth, also shows how this affects the idea of female virtue in terms of power – Charlotte “sunk” in her own esteem because she had less control over herself, and she “disgraced” herself because she did not listen to her inner virtue. Though Elizabeth’s

view may be seen as too romantic, she is practical in a different way, commenting that Charlotte's personal happiness was not to be found in her marriage choice. This is the true connotation of virtue to Austen: power to create one's own happiness, beyond social expectations. By surrendering her personal liberties to necessity, Charlotte also surrenders her worth as a sentient being and instead lets herself become an object of the system. The second conflict of virtue and necessity occurs with Lydia's unfortunate marriage to Mr. Wickham. Lydia ruins her family's reputation by "living" with Mr. Wickham before marriage and also by eloping. Mary, the normally quiet Bennet sister, gives her opinion on the matter when she says,

“Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful – and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior towards the undeserving of the other sex.”

Austen, though she critiques many other aspects of the “marriage economy,” does not criticize the idea that women cannot exist outside of this standard, and the idea that women must be virtuous and pure in order to be successful. One has to be conscious of her decisions in order to be happy and successful – thus one has to be self-knowledgeable and intelligent as well as chaste and beautiful. Mary makes this comment because she is more pensive than her sisters and thinks about the consequences of Lydia's actions, not only for her family, but for Lydia herself, as this lack of virtue plunges her not only into a ruined reputation, but also a ruined sense of self-worth, which is, Austen argues, most important, especially when comparing Lydia to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth holds on to her virtue by rejecting Mr. Collins – not only her chastity, but her sense of self worth – where as Lydia loses both by being with Mr. Wickham, which in the end does not make her happy anyway.

Learning from Charlotte and Lydia's unfortunate matches, Elizabeth realizes she is different from other women and seeks to use her self-knowledge as an asset, showing that she is an independent woman who will only marry an equal, not just the highest bidder. Early on in the novel, when Elizabeth goes to visit her ailing sister at Netherfield, Darcy remarks at her appearance after she arrives, saying to Miss Bingley and the others, "[s]he has nothing...I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild" (39). Darcy's comment that she "has nothing" means that not only in his opinion does she have no merit or manners for appearing to be so uncouth, but that financially she is worthless to him or anyone else. The fact that she is "wild" does not help the situation, as it shows that she was not well-raised, but it is also important to note that Elizabeth is a grown woman and realizes the consequences of appearing to be so wild – she comes in such a hurry and in such a way to care for her sister, showing her inner kindness, not to win a husband at the estate. With a blatant disregard for social expectations regarding her visit, Elizabeth shows that she knows what is morally important and that she knows herself, and does not need the judgement of other people to tell her what is important. Later on during her stay at Netherfield, during a discussion about the nature of love poetry and accomplished women, Elizabeth remarks that "everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away" (50). This is an especially pertinent comment regarding the nature of Elizabeth's personal growth throughout the novel, especially in comparison to her sisters and friends who make different marriage choices. Charlotte and Lydia could have been nourished by strong marriages and wise choices, but since their inner personalities were too weak to support their decisions, the "one good sonnet" – or one significant thing that happens to them – only serves to "starve away" or destroy their already frail lives. Elizabeth, however, is headstrong and virtuous

from the beginning, so everything that happens to her only nourishes her on her quest to truth and happiness. While Lydia and Mr. Wickham are reluctantly invited to stay at Longbourn after their marriage, Lydia invites her sisters to come to the balls at Newcastle later in the year. Elizabeth shrewdly replies, “I thank you for my share of the favour... but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands.” Blatantly insulting her sister’s immaturity and manners of courtship, Elizabeth shows that she is not looking to get married to any officer who will take her just because she is lovely and attractive. The other sisters are desperate to get married (the younger three especially) but Elizabeth has the ability to wait and search for the right person. In other words, she is looking for someone who will treat her as an equal, unlike the men that Lydia chooses who only see her as an object to take worldly advantage of.

The significance of Elizabeth’s persistence in the finding of virtue manifests itself when Mr. Darcy finds her to be worth more as a woman than as the material acquisitions she represents. Darcy’s proposal is not as romantic as it is honest and it includes a discourse on why he loves her in spite of himself – but his explanation is rather condescending and Elizabeth rebutes, “ ‘I might as well inquire, why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil?’ ” (215) Darcy’s lack of “civility” in his confession to Elizabeth, where he insults her, shows how important civility is to human relations and especially how Elizabeth will not merely surrender her own pride and sense of self-worth just because Darcy is of a higher social standing than herself. The very fact that Darcy did like her in spite of himself and despite the fact that she was “uncivil” in the older sense of the word, shows that she has more to offer than meets the eye or common understanding – she is more than the way her family presents herself or the worth of Longbourn in pounds per

year. Virtue changes meaning in this scene to be more than the chastity and respectful womanhood of its traditional definition, and instead is found in the meaning of the word “civility” meaning a solid character and moral presence in the world, which is more than money can buy. Darcy’s acknowledgement of this fact, against his “reason” which is traditional social molding, shows that this is the type of marriage and love that Austen wishes to be more important and frequent in the world.

The true realization of the power of actual morality and virtue, however strong it is in the beginning of the text, does not fully bloom until Elizabeth questions her own womanhood and character, thus showing that self-realization in a man or a woman is the only path to truth and inner happiness. After Mr. Darcy’s letter reveals to her the reality of Mr. Wickham’s history as well as Mr. Bingley’s mysterious disappearance from Netherfield, Austen writes of Elizabeth:

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd... ‘Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself.’
(235)

Though Elizabeth has been arguably more virtuous and intelligent than the other women in the novel up until this point, she has been vain and over-proud of her own righteousness. This is the definitive moment of the novel, when she realizes that she has to allow room for prejudice to be disproved, and thus shows that she is even more virtuous and strong because she can admit her own mistakes. She is “ashamed” and “absurd,” yes, but she also admits that she has “driven reason away,” giving motivation to the idea of rationalizing during the rest of her life, rather than just accepting what is told to her. By admitting her own mistakes and attempting to move beyond them, she proves herself to be a woman who knows her own worth, a woman who will not give up on her life. It is a very philosophical statement in a book that seems to be just about the day to day gossip of marriages and money. After this point in the novel she can begin to fully take

control of her life and commit herself to finding inner happiness without harming others. In this sense she encompasses the modern definition of virtue which Austen promotes so distinctly.

Elizabeth's soul-searching and quest for a rational way to live her life is ultimately rewarded as she gains the opportunity to marry for love, not for money, and is able to live her life in the way she wishes, equal in value to her husband. Darcy later confesses to her that he, too, was also prepossessed with pride and prejudice, much in the same way that she was, but that after he met her he was transformed by her sense and rationality as well as strength of character.

Explaining his past, he says,

'Unfortunately an only son (for many years an only *child*) I was spoiled by my parents, who though good themselves...allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I owe you!' (413).

Darcy's childhood serves to show that virtue is not merely the importance one puts on him or herself but also the way that important makes the world a better place at large. This comment shows the relationship between self-worth and the idea of morality, that is, being kind and virtuous towards other people. It is no longer a characteristic that creates purity or arrogance, but that makes people happier and more aware of the consequences of their own actions. The fact that Elizabeth gave Darcy the ability to mature gives shape to how adult Elizabeth had to be herself. It is also interesting that Austen makes Darcy say that he "owes" Elizabeth something – this is a reversal of the marriage economy, in which the woman's family would have to pay a dowry, and it shows that men and women, ideally to Austen, would be equal in the institution of marriage. Their love would be the binding feature of their relationship, not the money they are bringing to the contract, and in this way their happiness would be granted because they would be fulfilled as people. Both of their characters are "rewarded" because they had to change themselves

to see this; their hardwork is reflected in the harvest they reaped from each other and their own minds.

The Novel Pride and Prejudice ends with Elizabeth extremely satisfied in her marriage and starting a new family with Mr. Darcy. Austen uses this ending to show that the character's struggles between their own prejudices towards each other and lack of power against figures of authority was ultimately successful and that their inner intelligence and self-worth were rewarded by happiness. By showing the reader and Elizabeth the other options for marriage, which inevitably led to a lack of virtue and a disparaged reputation, Austen convinces the world that the true source of happiness is retaining one's virtue through self-realization and intelligent love. Though Austen does not challenge the idea that the marriage economy must exist, she does challenge its means of creating marriages and the overall effects of the economy on society by showing that women are at a disadvantage because they are not expected to be as motivated or stubborn as Elizabeth. However, Elizabeth is the only character who truly gains the life she wants for herself and represents to the world the new kind of women emerging, even if it is a slow emergence – a woman who is virtuous and kind, but not frail and helpless. Elizabeth Bennet has the power to realize her mistakes, change her life, and realize her own self worth – more than that of her family's wealth or manners.