

Bennets, Bonnets and Beyond: the Fictional World of Jane Austen

Bonnets and ballrooms; piano and picnics; coy glances and courtship. The world of Jane Austen's novels is instantly recognisable – the stuff of countless films, TV series and jolly documentaries, often hosted by equally jolly, head-girl types inviting us to drool over the delicious Darcy and embrace our inner Elizabeth Bennet. Parodied in sketch shows and a handy reference point for any aspiring rom-com writer, it's a mannered, anachronistic yet *safe* world of old-fashioned social mores and romance. Reading an Austen novel removes us from the day-to-day grind of debt, inequality and Coalition cock-ups; it is cosy – the equivalent of a warm blanket or fireside chair – and it provides escape from all the unpleasantness of modern life.

Or does it?

2013 is the bicentenary year for Austen's best loved novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Since its publication, P&P (as committed Janeites prefer to call it) has come to epitomise Regency romance, with its principled heroine determined to marry for love, not money, and its brooding, buttoned-up hero. Elizabeth and Darcy's world is one of card games and country house dances, inhabited by handsome, eligible suitors and agreeable young ladies

with pleasingly pinched cheeks. So far, so predictable. Yet scratch the surface and a darker, grittier narrative is revealed beneath the velvet frockcoats and froth. Elizabeth's mother – a comic figure mocked for her constant meddling – is driven by the very real need to marry her daughters off. A secure marriage was not just desirable but essential, in a time when reputation and family money was all. We are told of the Bennets' financial pressures early on: none of the family's five daughters can inherit their estate and, without the buffer of a wealthy husband, face a bleak future. Elizabeth's sisters do their best to impress potential suitors: they dance, sing and flirt (modestly), keen to show their credentials as would-be wife material. Meanwhile, our disdainful heroine scoffs as her siblings jump through these male-pleasing hoops. She sets herself apart and we modern, emancipated readers cheer for her – to a point. The thorny issue of impoverished spinsterhood lurks in the background, threatening to take the shine off her principled stance, until Darcy rallies and thaws and provides her with the love match she craves. Thus, all ends well, with good old Lizzy taking her place as mistress of Darcy's Pemberley estate and her share of ten thousand a year.

Phew!

Austen knew only too well the precarious position held by unmarried women of limited means. Her light, comic touch and wry observations belied a heartfelt understanding of the social Siberia spinsters faced. Letters to her sister, Cassandra, reveal the torment she endured aged twenty-one, after giving up what many scholars believe to be the love of her life, Tom Lefroy. Despite the strength of her feelings, the match was disapproved of by her family, as Lefroy's financial prospects were insufficient. Austen never recovered,

withdrawing instead into her writing, accepting her childless, single state and forced to depend upon her brother.

Her adult life was contained, although not entirely sheltered. As with any unmarried woman of the time, she assisted with family births, attended to sick relatives and visited the local poor, teaching their children to read and write. This exposed her to the often harsh realities of life, which she wove into the sub-text of her novels. There is talk of illegitimacy in *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, when it is believed that Mr Willoughby has seduced and abandoned a pregnant fifteen-year-old girl. In *Mansfield Park*, she addresses the issue of slavery, alluding to family wealth built on the proceeds of an Antigua plantation. Social inequality and the abuse of power are recurrent motifs in Austen's world of outward respectability and genteel pursuits.

So; what does this mean to the modern day Janeite?

Is it time to cast off our cosy comfort blanket readings and slump despondently in our fireside chair? Or can we still seek escape in the romance and comedy of Austen's novels? As someone who loves to lose themselves in the ballrooms of *Pride and Prejudice*, I hope its fans will still delight in Darcy and cheer on Lizzy Bennet for another two hundred years. However, let's not sell Miss Austen short by dismissing her fictional world as nothing more than gossip and trivia and crumpets for tea; beneath her bonnet, our knowing spinster was fully aware of life's dark, dangerous and often immoral underbelly.

Which is all rather modern, don't you think?

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