

I Do: Marriage for All the Right Reasons

by Elizabeth Moscoso

Marriage in modern American culture has an aura of fairy tale romance. We wait for the right person, that perfect partner that will make our lives complete, and we imagine that they are “out there,” looking for us too. Women are often portrayed by the media as being marriage obsessed, planning their walk down the aisle long before they have even met the man that will meet them at the other end. Wedding idea boards on the popular website Pinterest allows for women to “pin” ideas for what they dream their wedding will look like. Shows like “Say Yes to the Dress” give woman a chance to live vicariously through the women on the screen, hunting for the perfect wedding dress. What would Jane Austen have to say about this? Austen would tell us that while it is fine to dream of a happily ever after type of marriage, dreaming has a proper space, for example, the pages of her novels. In recent years, there has been a rise in the Jane Austen craze, fueled by spin-off novels, web series, and of course, film adaptations. Upon a first encounter with any of Jane Austen’s novels or Jane Austen-related media, it may seem that all of Austen’s stories are simply about romance and that marriage is the ultimate perfect gateway for a happily ever after, but that is not the whole story. Marriage, in Austen’s time, was certainly an event that women planned and hoped for, but for more practical reasons rather than romantic ones. A woman today can be educated, have a career, her own housing and possessions, all while being husbandless by choice. We can pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. Not the case for majority of the women in Austen’s time, or the female characters that people her novels. In fact, through the characters and the relationships that are developed, Austen grapples with what her own view of marriage is and what the real reasons one should enter into that union are. Unlike today, neither Austen nor her characters are able to date until

they meet “the one.” Should the first man that proposes to Regency woman be accepted if they have financial means to support a family, although there is no love? Or should a Regency women turn down proposals until true love comes to sweep them off their feet? Through her writing, Austen could play with what the outcomes would be if one married without love but for practical reasons, or if one married for love but outside of one’s social class, and if one married a social equal for love. In the end, Austen comes to the realization that marriage can only be successful if one marries a social equal for love and who exhibits a worthy character, integrity, and maturity.

As previously stated, marriage in the 18th century wasn’t about finding one’s “Prince Charming.” Marriage was more of a business -- one that dealt with making the best match to ensure financial security for the woman and her family, a way to gain possession of a house, and, if possible, rise in social rank. In essence, when looking for a marriage partner, the main question was: Who will be the most beneficial match? “A serious error in that quest [for marriage] would result in a lifetime not of pleasant submission, which should be the norm, but of patient suffering and unhappy martyrdom,” (Hammerton 280). This was no decision to take lightly. Sarah Ellis, mid-eighteenth century author of *Women of England*, *Mothers of England*, *Wives of England*, and *Daughters of England*, dedicated herself to educating girls for what she believed was the most crucial decision in their lives: the choice of a husband. Once married, death truly would be the only way to end a marriage as divorce was very rare and, if granted, would only be to benefit the male. In fact, women of the time were subjected to the financial control of their husbands, if not other male relatives, or guardians. Marriage was analogous to passing “from freedom into the condition of a slave,” (Offen 2). Although Austen never married, she knew about the life of a single woman and the economic importance of marriage for women as emphasized by characters in many of Austen’s other novels, such as Mrs. Bennett

in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen herself had to have her brother, Henry Austen, handle the business of publishing her novels, as it wasn't proper for a woman to represent herself in a "man's world." In addition, marriage could not only benefit the woman, but also the family, alleviating the burden of one less person to clothe and feed. In this sense, love could only be considered a happy side effect of a financially beneficial union. Of particular interest is the novel *Emma* and its couples: Emma and Mr. Knightley, Mr. Elton and Miss Augusta Hawkins, and Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, and how social equality, love, a worthy character, integrity, and maturity play a part in their relationships.

There is no denying that there is plenty of romance in Austen's novels to make all her readers wish for their own marriage with a gentleman such as Mr. Knightley, indicating that Austen felt marriage should be the union of two people of equal class that are in love. All other logical reasons to marry are secondary. Austen avoided entering into a love-less marriage herself after accepting and then revoking the marriage proposal of Harris Bigg-Wither, a man whose financial status as heir of Manydown Park would have given her relief from poverty and a chance to financially help out her sister, Cassandra, and her parents. We can only contemplate what life would have been like for Jane Austen had she become Jane Bigg-Wither. She might have become a mother to little Bigg-Wither babies rather than the creator of the entire worlds of her novels. Due to her brilliant writing, she had a different situation than other "maids" or older, single women with no prospects of marriage. She was able to make a living by writing and publishing novels such as *Emma*. With *Emma*, Austen reveals her internal struggle as it concerns marriage. Can a marriage be success if one marries a social equal for love but who is missing one of the following personal traits: a worthy character, integrity, or maturity? Or is marriage for practical reasons, regardless of anything else, the real reason one should marry? By the end of the novel, Austen will have taken us through a journey in the quest of

finding the answer to what makes marriage successful, and with the union of Emma and Mr. Knightley, concludes that her ideal marriage is one that unites two people in love who also have a worthy character, integrity, or maturity.

At beginning of the novel, Emma is an immature young woman, and as we know, learns an important lesson the hard way. She comes to learn that she can't force love or even a slight attraction to form where there is none. The first bump in her matchmaking attempts is with her match between Mr. Elton and Harriet. Austen creates a relationship between Mr. Elton and Miss Hawkins and marries them for all the wrong reasons: money and property. It is apparent that Mr. Elton was not looking to marry for love, but for money. As if to exemplify her dislike for marriage simply for the sake of financial reasons, Austen makes the Eltons the couple that one would avoid at a party. As if readers could dislike Mr. Elton any more when he admits he could never stoop so low as to marry Harriet, he goes and couples with a woman whose character is as far below Harriet's as Harriet is below Mrs. Elton in social class. Through the Eltons, Austen proves that marriage without the key ingredients of class, love, character, maturity and integrity, will not lead to a pleasant addition to one's society. With Jane and Frank, Austen has explored a relationship based in love, yet made tense with social and moral issues, proving that love can lead one to make a painful choice, yet can also break through the rigidity of societal class. It is no mistake that Austen created the flawed relationship of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. It is clear that Frank is missing all the important traits, except love, to make his marriage with Jane successful. Love is typically believed to be the most important part of any relationship, but without other important personal traits, love on its own doesn't mean a happily ever after will ensue.

The final marriage of the novel is between our heroine and our hero, Emma -whom no one but myself will much like," as stated by Austen herself – and Mr. Knightley. The novel

begins with a succinct description of Emma: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her,” (3). One of the things that didn’t distress or vex her: marriage. Emma Woodhouse is a young woman that comes from a family of wealth and high social class, unlike Austen’s other heroines. From a young age Emma became the mistress of Hartfield, her father’s estate in Highbury, due to her mother’s death, when Emma was just a child. She may be young and live in a small town, but Emma is under no pretense of what marriage is and why women of her time must marry. “I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry... Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I do believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield...,” (80). If Emma doesn’t need to marry and doesn’t have any inclination to do so throughout the novel, why does Austen have her marry? It isn’t only for the satisfaction of having a happy ending, but for Austen to show her readers what a truly successful marriage should look like: two people of equal class in love, both of whom are mature, have a worthiness of character and have integrity.

Austen doesn’t make the road for Emma’s marriage with Mr. Knightley an easy one. By the end of the novel, Austen has given Emma challenges that transform her into a woman ready for marriage. In defense of Emma, she is just a young girl when the novel starts, still immature in the ways of love. It was common for girls to marry young while their husbands were typically much older. A man was ready for marriage once he was in a stable financial which would allow him to marry and sustain a family. A girl was ready to marry at the peak of beauty, which was at a very young age, and it was also ideal for them to be young to ensure plenty of fertility for childbearing and rearing. Emma is, culturally speaking, in her peak period

for marriage, yet as Austen shows us, she is not ready. She much rather would play matchmaker for others and delights in thinking that she is in too good of a situation to give up her freedom for marriage, which does have some truth to it. "Austen knew that when a woman married, she gave up all control of her life. [In fact], an unmarried woman had more legal rights than a married woman. An unmarried woman had a right to her own earnings and property and was a reasonably free agent... once married, there was virtually no chance of escape from the marriage for the woman," (Sprehe 12). Emma seemingly has it all, but she is missing an element that she works so hard at, and fruitlessly in the case of Harriet, Mr. Elton and Mr. Frank Churchill: she is missing true love.

Emma can only come to appreciate true love and gain a desire for marriage through maturation. She comes to mature through the lessons she learns throughout the novel, including painful lessons in respecting others and acknowledging that she can't control the emotions of others. While some critics have suggested that Emma is "trained" by Mr. Knightley to be his perfect wife, Eberle believes that "Emma is not the story of a man teaching a woman how to be his perfect wife; rather it is the story of a woman understanding her social responsibility and realizing her true potential," (17). Interestingly, Eberle connects Emma's maturation and acceptance of marriage as Emma coming into power and social responsibility. As the prominent wife of Mr. Knightley, Emma can become a social leader in Highbury as she changes her focus on herself outward towards the community. Austen may indeed have had maturation and social responsibility in mind when she brought Emma and Mr. Knightley together in marriage of "perfect happiness," but ultimately she was exploring the idea of marriage between two equals that have all the key components of a happy marriage: love, a worthy character, maturity and integrity. Maturation allowed Emma to realize "that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (Austen 389). She shows integrity when she tells Mr.

Knightley, “My blindness to what was going on led me to act by then in a way that I must always be ashamed of ...”(406). Emma is honest with herself and Mr. Knightley, showing a growth of character that is necessary for Emma to be open to marriage. There was nothing to prevent them from marrying; both Emma and Mr. Knightley are in the same social circles, they both come from fortune and, mostly importantly, they love each other and have all the personal traits that can lead to a happy future for the couple. Austen gives readers the hope of marrying for love, if only through the imagination and world of Highbury. In real life, it may be hard to be so careful in finding a person that one loves and has a worthy character, maturity and integrity, and that is also an equal of social class.

Jane Austen had her own confusion when it came to marriage. “I am feeling differently every moment and shall not be able to suggest a single thing that can assist your mind – I could lament in one sentence and laugh in the next...” she wrote to Fanny about marriage (Ed. Le Faye 278). Within the world of Highbury, Austen had the unique opportunity of exploring different marriage situations as a way of coming to her own understanding of what marriage should truly be for. With the Eltons, we come to see that marriage for the sake of social and financial benefits can unite two people that together do nothing for each other’s growth or improvement. With Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, we question whether love can really surpass the issues of marrying someone lacking maturity and integrity. Concluding the novel is the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley; a marriage of equals in love. Obviously, Austen had to appeal to her readers, as *Emma* is a romantic comedy of sorts, but the serious message by the end of the novel is that marriage has the best chance of “perfect happiness” when it is between individuals of the same social class (particularly upper class), who are in love and have a worthy character, maturity and integrity. Without one of those key components, the marriage isn’t based on a strong foundation of understanding and equality. As to what Austen would have

said to a modern girl, pinning wedding ideas on Pinterest or watching “Say Yes to the Dress” and dreaming about her future wedding? Austen would have written a long letter advising the young lady that she can lose herself in fantasy worlds of one’s dreams, but in reality marriage must be balanced with love, character, maturity and integrity. Only then can one have hopes to attaining “perfect happiness” in marriage. While Austen’s novel *Emma* is often thought of only as a romantic comedy and we may laugh at silly Mr. Elton, shake our heads at Emma’s mistakes and swoon when Mr. Knightley proposes, there is a serious message for all women thinking of marriage: choose wisely whom you marry and when you do marry, do it for all the right reasons.

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