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INTRODUCTION
BY LETA SUNDET

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Like many other great first lines in literature, the opening sentence of *Pride & Prejudice* contains in microcosm what is to come. It lets us know immediately, of course, the novel's central concern: marriage—the finding of a husband or a wife. This is, we suspect, going to be a love story. But the obvious irony of the statement complicates the picture. This "great universal truth" of rich single men wanting wives—where does it exist? Primarily, we learn, in the minds of Mrs. Bennet and other mothers in the neighborhood. Is it true? And if so, are singleness and wealth the only qualifications a man needs for marriage? Are there certain qualities of character—certain virtues—he should display? Is "a wife"—any old wife—all this man is likely to be looking for? In addition, that ironic use of "truth" calls our attention to the difficult task of coming to know the truth about anything: How do we distinguish between what is true and what we *want* to be true?

And there we have a handful—but a significant handful—of the questions *Pride & Prejudice* will go on to explore.

What are the ends of marriage?

Pride & Prejudice is a story about marriage—not just *a* marriage but Marriage itself. As such, it gives us a swath of actual and potential marriages to consider and compare to each other. We are introduced first to Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's marriage, unequal and largely unhappy, as well as the family of daughters that has resulted from it. We see an ugly echo of her parents' choices in Lydia's marriage to Mr. Wickham—the suggestion of a generational curse. But we also see Elizabeth and Jane Bennet escaping the familial

pattern, desiring and seeking a different way of being. Influenced perhaps by the warm companionship of their aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, Jane and Elizabeth pursue marriages based neither on mindless passion nor on the more mercenary concerns that compel Charlotte Lucas to marry the ridiculous Mr. Collins. They are determined to marry prudently *and* to marry for love—even if that means risking singleness. It is a conviction echoed more subtly in Mr. Darcy's disdain for both the flattering attentions of Caroline Bingley and for the dynastic marriage orchestrated by his aunt; he too is determined to marry someone for whom he has both affection and respect.

But the most obvious concern of the characters in the novel—"Who should I marry?"—has its roots in a more fundamental question: What is marriage *for*?

Is marriage merely a way to legitimize lust, as we see in Lydia and Wickham's relationship, which happens simply because "their passions [are] stronger than their virtue"? Is it a means to personal security or a status boost for one's family, as Charlotte Lucas and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in their different ways insist? These are answers to the question that modern people still propose—though we might use different language to do so—and there is legitimacy to the concerns they represent: Surely the good of society depends on people controlling and channeling their desires, and economic considerations are not beside the point when one is choosing a life partner.

However, the novel insists that marriage should have an even more fundamental aim: the good of our souls. In Jane's relationship to Mr. Bingley we see two like-minded people marrying based on their genuine—and tested—affection for each other: marriage sought for the sake of companionship and mutual comfort—for the sake of happiness. But Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage takes us even a step beyond that, into a larger vision

of what marriage—and happiness—can mean. When Elizabeth muses near the end of the novel on what her marriage to Darcy would look like, she thinks of the good they could do each other's *characters*: "by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance." The influence Elizabeth and Darcy would exercise over each other would, Elizabeth believes, make each a more complete human being. *Pride & Prejudice* is a love story, surely, but it urges us to ask what marriage has to do with developing virtue—that is, with becoming more fully human.

What does it mean to be a virtuous person?

The character who talks most in the novel about virtue is Mary Bennet—the dour middle Bennet sister who spends most of her time reading. While Mary can moralize extensively and "correctly" in most situations, neither the other characters, the narrator, nor the audience have much patience for her. The narrator calls Mary's opinions "threadbare morality," suggesting that they are worn out, tired, cliched. But this raises the question: What does a morality that is *not* threadbare—that is thick, deep, and rich—look like?

We see most obviously and painfully the consequences of having *no* virtue in Lydia Bennet. When she runs away with Mr. Wickham, she gives no thought to how she is endangering her future life, her family's reputation, or her own soul. Saved from ruin by Mr. Darcy's intervention, she has manifestly *not* been saved from her own bad character. But where did that bad character come from? Is she doomed to it by her upbringing or by her own nature? *Could* virtue have developed, and if so, how? What ultimately makes the difference between a Lydia and an Elizabeth Bennet?

While *Pride & Prejudice* does not answer any of these questions definitely, a moment of moral clarity—a kind of

touchstone—emerges when, about halfway through the novel, Elizabeth listens to her sister Lydia insulting a girl neither of them liked. Hearing these crass words come out of her sister's mouth, words that expose vanity, arrogance, and shallow self-absorption, Elizabeth realizes to her horror that while "incapable of such coarseness of *expression* herself," she has *thought* and *felt* very nearly the same things as Lydia. She has been better at disguising selfishness, even from herself, but it has been present in her heart too.

In *Pride & Prejudice*, virtue is not just a matter of articulating and adhering to certain standards of behavior—of saying or doing the right things. The difference between Elizabeth and Lydia Bennet is not that one behaves herself and the other doesn't—or even that one has a moral understanding the other lacks. It is that one is trapped inside her own silly little head while the other manages to escape herself—to look at herself honestly as if from the outside, stand in judgment, and desire to change. In the rich morality of Austen's novels, virtue means being in tune with the world—seeing the world truly and cultivating a vision for how we should be in it.

What are the conditions of right seeing and right judgment?

Since virtue has everything to do with seeing and judging rightly, *Pride & Prejudice* is also a novel about how one comes to know the truth—and the challenge of that project. The obvious impediment to right seeing is, of course, the people like George Wickham who hide the truth from others, who intentionally deceive. But over the course of the novel, Elizabeth discovers that deceivers are not the only or even primary obstacle to right seeing and right judgment; very often we find an equal if not a greater obstacle in ourselves.

Initially Elizabeth prides herself on her discernment, particularly in contrast to her sister Jane, who wishes so well

of everyone that she refuses to make judgments at all. But one of Elizabeth's self-discoveries is that she has been doing her own kind of wishful thinking. When she learns, after reading Mr. Darcy's letter, how grievously she has misjudged the characters of both Wickham and Darcy, Elizabeth does not blame Wickham for deceiving her—although he certainly has. Rather, she blames *herself* for culpable blindness:

> How despicably have I acted! … I, who have prided myself on my discernment! … 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.

What Elizabeth realizes is that her misjudgment of Wickham was not an innocent mistake. She didn't see the truth because she didn't *want* to see the truth. Her own hurt pride caused her to wish evil of Darcy and therefore see evil when it wasn't there; Wickham's flattery made her interpret all his actions in a flattering light. Her judgment was prejudiced: She believed what she wanted to be true.

What is the antidote to this kind of culpable blindness, based in vanity and self-love, in our reverence for ourselves? During the second half of the novel, Elizabeth does not so much move from wrong judgment into right judgment as she moves from arrogant self-assurance into self-doubt and openness—the prerequisite to right judgment. During her visit to Pemberley, as Elizabeth walks through Darcy's house and hears him described, she is full of questions, full of wonder, hanging on the words of others. She is hesitant to make any

definitive judgments at all, acutely conscious of her own limitations. Because of this disposition of openness, Elizabeth comes to see Darcy truly for the first time—through the testimony of his servants, of his home, and ultimately of the man himself. Elizabeth begins to understand that one cannot see rightly on one's own—that right judgment demands other eyes and other voices.

What is genuine friendship?

This need for other eyes and voices draws our attention to the importance of friendship in this novel. One could even argue that *Pride & Prejudice* is about the search for true friendship. In the opening chapters, the relationship of Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas is prominent. But when Charlotte marries Mr. Collins, displaying a vision of marriage that Elizabeth finds reprehensible, Elizabeth believes that "no real confidence [can] ever subsist between them again." It is clear that what Elizabeth values chiefly in friendship is like-mindedness.

Is like-mindedness *all* one should seek from friendship, however? In the wake of Charlotte's "betrayal," Elizabeth turns to her sister Jane, whom she trusts absolutely. Jane does provide some pushback to Elizabeth's critical spirit with her "generous candor," but Elizabeth finds Jane's perspective easy to dismiss in preference for her own. In this, she resembles Mr. Darcy in his relationship with Mr. Bingley. Both Darcy and Elizabeth feel themselves to be the superior in these friendships—Darcy confident in his worldly wisdom, Elizabeth in her acuity. Darcy's sense of superiority causes him to unduly and arrogantly influence his friend; Elizabeth's to discount her sister's perspective in favor of her own judgments. As each of them learns humility, however, they recover right relationships: Darcy acknowledges Bingley's independent moral identity and

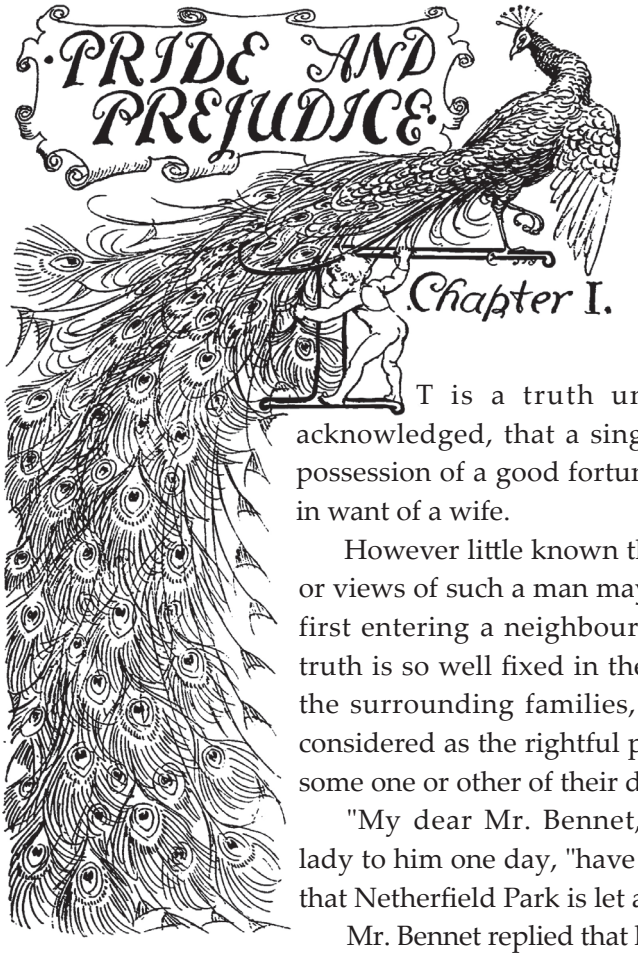
respects him in it, and Elizabeth recognizes her sister's perspective as an important counterpoint to her own.

But it is Elizabeth and Darcy's friendship with each other that is perhaps the most significant force in this novel. In important ways they are like-minded: Both are intelligent, thoughtful, morally serious, and courageous. But their dramatically different backgrounds and upbringings position them against each other. Almost from the first, they speak with astonishing frankness. During Darcy's disastrous first proposal neither pulls any punches as they unapologetically pinpoint each others' failings. Although there is a certain brutality to their treatment of each other during this conversation, their honesty has a powerful effect. Darcy comes to see himself as if with Elizabeth's eyes; he takes her words to heart and makes a serious attempt to alter his own character as a result. At the same time, Darcy's letter setting the story straight does its own work on Elizabeth, causing her to "know [her]self" for the first time. Even before their marriage, they have been doing the work of friendship for each other—which is how we know their marriage will be such a good thing.

Thus, *Pride & Prejudice* is a romantic comedy in the grand Shakespearean tradition of romantic comedies: Inside a rich tapestry of characters both serious and silly, a man and woman meet as intellectual and moral equals but also as the representatives of two different communities. Their challenging and even initially antagonistic relationship develops into one of mutual respect and a true meeting of minds—genuine friendship. Their marriage provides hope to the larger community through the enlarged vision it offers of full humanity, human flourishing, and human happiness.



Volume I



Chapter I.

IT is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

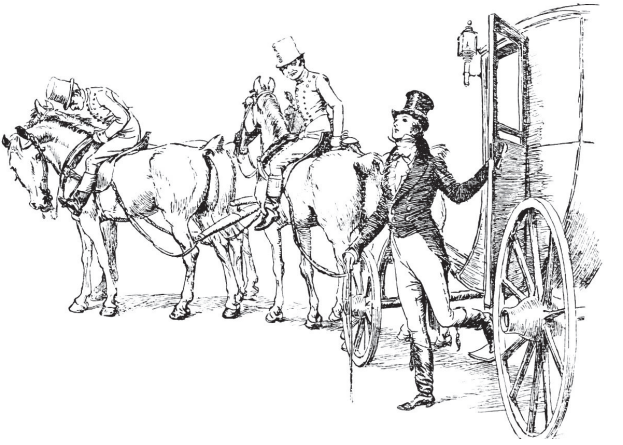
"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife, impatiently.

"*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the

north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four[1] to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."



"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh, single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome? You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design? Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

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[1] a closed carriage pulled by four horses