



The Zaniness of the Marriage Plot in *Pride and Prejudice*

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MARRIAGE IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* is an economic proposition, starting from the work's first sentence. The narrator says early of Mrs. Bennet that the "business of her life was to get her daughters married" (5), but the desperation and anxiety created by the necessity of marriage becomes amplified by the multiplicity of roles the novel's characters, especially Elizabeth Bennet, play. To her mother, she is a financial burden who desperately needs to secure a lucrative marriage. To Mr. Collins, she is a fitting choice for a wife. To herself, she is a quick-witted and wise individual who is right to respond negatively to the narrow interests of those who want her to marry expeditiously. All these roles are limiting, including the one in which she casts herself, which is belied by her own initial incorrect judgment of Darcy. Juggling these roles that arise from *Pride and Prejudice's* marriage plot is frenetic and fragmenting, creating a sense of exhausted powerlessness. Elizabeth maintains a clear sense of who she believes she is, yet she is alienated from that identity by circumstances where familial influence and economic necessity twist and contort her into these artificial roles.

This frenetic, precarious contortion fits into the category the critic Sianne Ngai defines as the "zany," a particular "style of incessant doing" defined by "the experience of an agent confronted by—and endangered by—too many things coming at her at once" (181–83). For Ngai, zaniness is a distinct category from the innocently silly and comedic, a category concerned with the disorienting alienation resulting from the precarious necessity to be too flexible,

to fill too many roles. Considering Elizabeth through Ngai's view of the zany reframes her experience of economic and psychological precarity as one of fragmented exhaustion, and only her final reconciliation with Darcy frees her, albeit incompletely, from the burden of inhabiting this limiting matrix of roles.

Zaniness precludes the formation of a coherent, stable conception of identity. Instead of being firm and unified, identity becomes segmented into a series of artificial, often clashing roles. A key component of zaniness is the unsettling mixture of "playfulness in all its manifestations" with "action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes" (Ngai 185). If *Pride and Prejudice* overtly framed the contortions Elizabeth's circumstances require of her as overwhelmingly bleak, the result would not be zany. While Ngai focuses her study of the zany on the industrial and post-industrial eras, she defines modern zaniness as only the newest form of a tradition that dates back to commedia dell'arte, developed in Italy during the early modern period. She dates the contemporary concept of zaniness as having its foundation in the works of Gioachino Rossini and Denis Diderot. Ngai's conception of zaniness expands significantly beyond the everyday definition of the term. Weirdness and goofiness, while often accompanying the zany, have little in common with the overall aesthetic experience that interests Ngai, an experience that mixes anxious, exhausted malaise with constant striving and adaptability. The zany individual futilely struggles to meet the burden of filling too many obligations at once, becoming atomized into detached parts.

Ngai gestures to Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* as exemplary literary portrayals of zaniness. The nephew practices a wide variety of different musical skills but masters none of them and thus dooms himself to the status of a dilettante attempting to entertain his patrons. Joseph Roach astutely states that his "entire nature is impromptu" (123). Lacking a solid artistic identity, he remakes his presentation with every passing moment, attempting to please others but failing, revealing the hollowness and fatigue beneath his frenetic behavior. *The Barber of Seville's* Figaro portrays a similar dynamic, particularly in his signature aria "Largo al factotum," a dizzyingly energetic tune portraying Figaro's commitment to acting in every role the citizens of the town need him to fill. While not quite as desperate as Rameau's nephew, he suffers from the same lack of a distinct, fixed identity because of his "generalized relation to labor" and struggle to "meet all the demands of others" (Ngai 191). The aria, like the nephew's speeches, depicts a state of complete fluidity, as well as impossibility of any coherent sense of self when confronted with the cavalcade of duties that demand such fluidity.

Austen confronts similar issues in *Pride and Prejudice*, though the zaniness in her novel is subtler and less effusive, befitting her social-realist tendencies.

Much of this zaniness comes in the divide between the mirth and elegance that superficially cloak the courtship process and the disorienting, alienating frenzy that defines Elizabeth's experience of that process. This discrepancy is most apparent in the Mr. Collins episode. When Mr. Collins makes his intentions known, Mrs. Bennet is ecstatic, saying, "I am sure Lizzy will be very happy—I am sure she can have no objection" (117). For her, his idea is sensible and straightforward. Elizabeth needs to be married, and the marriage to Mr. Collins solves many of the family's financial difficulties. That this prospective marriage is consciously an economic proposition is not, for Mrs. Bennet or Mr. Collins, intrinsically alienating, as the roles they play never conflict with any deeply held sense of conviction or self-concept. *Pride and Prejudice* frequently depicts Mrs. Bennet as frivolous, and Mr. Collins's tendency to make oblivious statements should be considered in the context of his "weak head" (78) or his being "much better fitted for a walker than a reader" (80). Neither is deceitful or dishonest; they are exactly what they superficially appear to be. There is no conflict in performing the roles social circumstances require of them. For Elizabeth, conversely, the playful, performative world of courtship is fundamentally disorienting, as socio-economic pressures attempt to contort her into a role that is external and artificial to what she organically desires.

Pride and Prejudice illustrates the fundamental difference in experience between Elizabeth and Mr. Collins at her rejection of his proposal. Elizabeth expresses her earnest feelings as crisply and straightforwardly as she can, but, from his perspective, she is being playful and coy. Accustomed to the formal, artificial rules of courtship, he believes she is merely performing a predetermined part. He states that "you are not serious in your rejection of me," ascribing it instead to a wish of "increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females" (122). Mr. Collins is linear in his reasoning. Understanding himself to be a suitable match for Elizabeth because of his connections and her family's dire financial status, he casts her in the role of a bashful maiden whose affections can be won with determination and persistence. For him, the pursuit of Elizabeth is a civil but transactional affair, punctuated by typical courtship rituals. For Elizabeth, the expectation of performative rituals becomes alienating. Had she another solid option at the time of Mr. Collins's proposal, his proposal would be merely silly or goofy. Because she remains caught between her internal desires and her need to make an advantageous match, however, the episode becomes zany. Faced with the

socio-economic necessity of being malleable, twisting herself into a shape suitable to her mother and Mr. Collins, she finds such a burden impossible.

Mr. Collins himself has nothing of the zany about him. For him, as John Lauber lucidly asserts, “the business of life consists of a series of rituals to be performed in the established ways”: “going through the expected actions, he is confident that the appropriate result must follow” (516). He approaches courtship as a series of formulas that, when mechanically followed, will result in marriage. Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet do not find themselves suffering from the fractured exhaustion resulting from flailing attempts to mold themselves into artificial roles. Mr. Collins is admittedly in a more advantageous position than Mrs. Bennet because he stands to inherit Mr. Bennet’s fortune, but both enjoy the comfort of cohesion between their minds and their actions.

Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet have simplistic desires that directly relate to fixing practical issues. Even when they fail in their wishes to marry Mr. Collins to Elizabeth, they are easily flexible, as what they want is aligned with what economic necessity and social standards assert is prudent. Mr. Collins marries Charlotte Lucas after his ambitions to marry Jane or Elizabeth fail, and Mrs. Bennet is one of the very few characters to express joy at Lydia’s marriage to Wickham. *Pride and Prejudice* sharply contrasts her reaction to that of her family: “Smiles decked the face of Mrs. Bennet, as the carriage drove up to the door; her husband looked impenetrably grave; her daughters, alarmed, anxious, uneasy” (348). Elizabeth lacks that degree of malleability, unable to fully fit into the roles into which *Pride and Prejudice*’s marriage plot thrusts her, as she is more internally divided, caught in the machinery of roles she is largely impotent to escape.

Darcy’s initial proposal promises to alleviate Elizabeth’s economic woes but not the psychological malaise of committing to a relationship not accordant with her organic desires. It presents her with an opportunity to demonstrate immense flexibility, gracefully ascending from the embarrassment of the Mr. Collins situation to a second and far more fruitful opportunity. Yet she rejects this obligation of flexibility. Instead of considering the financial benefit of marrying Darcy, she focuses only on the conflict between her scorn of him and his profession of affection for her, leaving her in an alienated situation where the “tumult of her mind was now painfully great” (216). For Mrs. Bennet, who values Darcy for his money and status, eventually accepting him causes no conflict, as there is no separation between her psychological desires and her practical interests. To Elizabeth’s disdain, her mother flips to obsequiously praising Darcy, saying that, because of his wealth, he is “as good as

a Lord” (420). Her previous dislike of him instantly dissolves, indicating a willingness to morph into whatever role is most advantageous. Elizabeth, conversely, requires a gradual and nonlinear reevaluation of Darcy before she can confidently make the prudent and economically beneficial choice of accepting his offer. She struggles to reconcile the practical importance of marrying with restlessness at the reductive solutions proposed by her mother and Mr. Collins.

Admittedly, even the more simplistic characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are not merely mechanistic. E. M. Forster admires the way Jane Austen’s overtly flat characters are “capable of rotundity” (74). For Forster, Austen’s characters provide “a slightly new pleasure each time they come in” (75), instead of being Dickens-like caricatures. When Mrs. Bennet expresses surprise at Mr. Bennet’s refusal to support her in coercing Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, she takes on an increased degree of dimensionality because of her temporary disorientation. Frenetic, she “coaxed and threatened” Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, and when that desperate attempt fails, she “endeavoured to secure Jane in her interest” (125). Mr. Collins, though more subdued, responds with similar disoriented anxiety when he finally understands that Elizabeth refuses his offer of marriage. Still, these characters are linear enough in their thinking and simplistic enough in their desires that they never have to contort themselves as Elizabeth does. Lauber calls them two characters “who complement each other perfectly,” sharing a fundamental “shallowness of feelings and exclusive concern for the external and material” (517). They never suffer any profound, extended sense of antagonism toward the social and economic roles they must fill.

Elizabeth, conversely, is not freed from zaniness by escaping Mr. Collins’s proposal. *Pride and Prejudice*’s marriage plot requires a division between Elizabeth and the roles she attempts to play. If she were able to compel herself to marry Mr. Collins, the marriage plot would end. The same would be true if she accepted Darcy’s original proposal. In both cases, such abbreviated endings would be unsatisfying. As Peter Brooks argues, “the narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death,” but it must be “the right death, the correct end” (103). Elizabeth’s accepting either of these two proposals would be the wrong end for the marriage plot of *Pride and Prejudice* because doing so would not resolve the discrepancy between the economic necessity that she marry and the internal disaffection she experiences from the contortion and infinite flexibility her precarity requires. To not marry is to threaten her future and that of her family. To commit to an unsatisfying marriage is to bind herself to an artificial role, a tawdry performance with no relation to what she organically desires.

For Ngai, what characterizes the zany performer is both the need to fill a harrying multiplicity of roles and the failure to succeed at this obligation. The central example Ngai offers is Lucy Ricardo from *I Love Lucy*, whose circumstances force her to be absurdly malleable, taking temporary jobs ranging from a magician's assistant to an assembly line worker in a chocolate factory, inevitably leading to repeated failure. She must be mechanical, performing alienating and isolating tasks as a response to financial precarity, but she must also demonstrate a liquid-like capacity to transform herself to fit a wide variety of roles, being "constantly in motion and in flight from precarious situations in particular" (Ngai 182). Elizabeth Bennet differs significantly, of course, from Lucy Ricardo, to the extent that comparing these two characters initially appears ridiculous. Elizabeth's wryly witty but otherwise restrained personality starkly contrasts to Lucy's incessant exuberance, and the social circumstances of the two are no less disparate. Austen's social realism imbues the single decision of choosing a marriage partner with titanic heft, while *I Love Lucy* relies for its humor on an unceasing, disorienting onslaught of absurd responsibilities. Yet Ngai's conception of the zany extends to the dynamics of social pressure and economic precarity that far precede the harrying world of industrial production depicted in *I Love Lucy*. As the instances of *Rameau's Nephew* and *The Barber of Seville* indicate, viewing Elizabeth's frenetic discontent in *Pride and Prejudice* as zany is far from ludicrous.

Zaniness undergirds characters as disparate as Lucy Ricardo and Figaro because it encompasses a broad series of oppositions between inner and outer, between organic, personal desires for untroubled harmony and the relentless energy exerted to fulfill absurd objectives and perform absolute flexibility. Characters threatened by zaniness confront the risk of losing their distinct identities and becoming "nothing but a series of projects and activities" (Ngai 196). Zaniness requires action within a comprehensive system of economic necessity that causes psychological strain. The zany is not merely a personality type, like the roguish adventurer or cowardly sidekick. As Ngai clarifies, being zany requires being "affective and physical," and zaniness "is most acutely brought forth in social situations" (182). Far from ascending to the transcendence of mythic archetype, zaniness depends on an outside environment. That environment forms and mediates the isolating burden that defines the zany's frenetic experience of the world. Historical and cultural trends and mores shape that environment. Zaniness in *Pride and Prejudice* inevitably looks different from zaniness in *I Love Lucy* or *Rameau's Nephew* because the world of *Pride and Prejudice* fundamentally contrasts with the worlds of those works.

In Austen, zaniness has less of a physical component. A few zany scenes in *Pride and Prejudice*, such as the dancing scenes, do have a physical component, but the strain and exhaustion rippling through these scenes never comes from physical exertion. With participants (except for Mr. Collins) moving easily through the steps, the dancing scenes are in physical terms orderly and unfrenzied. Elizabeth and others of her milieu understand the rules and conventions of dancing and view it as a pleasurable and beautiful diversion. Zaniness results from the discrepancy between the instinctual joy of dancing and the frequently dizzying social significance it conveys. The idea that being “fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love” cultivates frantic unease as much as optimistic promise (9). It ladens the dancing with a responsibility to facilitate courtship through signals that characters often have difficulty reading. Elizabeth understandably but incorrectly takes the social offense of Darcy’s initial refusal to dance with her and reference to her as merely “tolerable” and “not handsome enough” to convey a withering lack of interest (12). Darcy makes a similar mistake, misunderstanding the depth of the connection dancing helps cultivate between Jane and Bingley, with Jane gushing that Bingley is “sensible, good humoured, lively” (15).

Misunderstanding does not necessarily connote zaniness, but the discrepancy between the refined elegance of the dancing scenes and the uncertain anxiety they engender creates the alienation Ngai attributes to the zany. Disorientation pollutes the sophisticated energy of the dances, wearying Elizabeth with the sheer volume of information to read and with disparate responsibilities to manage. The doggedly enterprising Mr. Collins approaches Elizabeth before a dance, even after she politely but firmly expresses her lack of interest, and he refuses to dance with anyone else. His statement that he has no passion for dancing—the occasion only providing the opportunity to impose on her—befits one who views his formal declaration of interest in Elizabeth as merely “a regular part of the business” (117). Instead of infusing her with delightful enthusiasm, the ritualistic world of the dance traps her with the oblivious Mr. Collins, and “though he could not prevail with her to dance with him again,” he could preclude her from having the “power to dance with others” (114).

Such situations, so different from the broad, sweaty desperation of *Rameau’s Nephew* or *I Love Lucy* but no less characterized by disaffected, harried participation in rigid socio-economic roles, delineate a distinctly Austenian form of zaniness. Because of Elizabeth’s refusal to accept Mr. Collins’s proposal and fix herself to the limited role he constructs for her, she must navigate an

overwhelming surfeit of duties. She must attempt to judge Darcy's unexpected confession and proposal and confront Wickham's network of deceptions while satisfying the divergent expectations of both of her parents and attempting to satisfy her self-image as a sharp-witted individualist.

Her inevitable failure to satisfactorily perform these exhausting and often contradictory roles produces the strained, frazzled disorientation that is essential to Ngai's concept of zaniness. Henri Bergson viewed humor as resulting from the rigid failure to adapt to abrupt and wildly shifting circumstances, and Ngai twists this idea, arguing that "there is something fundamentally anticomical and even pathological" about individuals who "do nothing else" but attempt and ultimately fail to make themselves flexible (189). *Pride and Prejudice's* marriage plot depends for its constant extension on Elizabeth's fundamental inability to escape her zany circumstances. This inability is not her fault. Despite the connotations of buffoonish absurdity that suffuse the idea of zaniness, Ngai refers to the commedia dell'arte tradition that invented the figure of the zany, arguing that "the labor that defines this comedic performer is real and also serious" (190). Working harder is not an escape from zaniness. On the contrary, the zany figure suffers from "wanting too much and trying too hard" (Ngai 189). The distorted, contradictory muddle of roles and performances burdening Elizabeth is a problem she does not have the power or capacity to fix.

Only when Darcy reveals his true intentions can the marriage plot conclude, providing Elizabeth with freedom from the exhaustions of zaniness. A broader historical perspective reveals the specific nature of Elizabeth's zaniness and the resolution offered by Darcy's second proposal. Raymond Williams argues that while the worlds in which Austen's novels take place might ostensibly seem to be stable and unchanging, they present, if obliquely, "the changes of fortune—the facts of general change and a certain mobility—which were affecting the landed families at the time" (113). A growing commercial sector, stimulated by the production of vast amounts of profitable commodities, disrupted a relatively stable and static agricultural economy. Increasingly complex networks of trade and production stimulated the creation of vast quantities of wealth that did not strictly belong to the old, landed gentry. As Williams writes, at the time of Jane Austen's novels, "an acquisitive, high bourgeois society" found itself "at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles" (115). The preexisting social order, based on the orderly and theoretically unambiguous passing of land down the patrilineal line, began to crumble under the

pressure exerted by new, more explicitly commercial sources of wealth. While the changes wrought by the rise of a merchant-commercial class were far less overtly felt in the countryside than in London, they disrupted the predictability and cohesion of agrarian life. An older system based on birth and status, predictable even though exploitative and hierarchical, begins to unravel under the pressures of an explicitly profit-centric system based strictly on acquisition and accumulation.

The mixing together of the two systems resulted in a type of confused disorientation that Ngai could easily call *zany*: the blurring together of different, even contrary roles, the fear of precarity, and the bombardment of economic and social pressures. Ngai even references Williams regarding the link between modes of production and modes of social relation. Viewing Williams in concert with Ngai reveals that *zanimess* is amorphous and historically dependent, arising from different forms of economic precarity and frenetic weariness. In the time of Jane Austen, the influx of a militantly commercial mindset into a staid agrarian environment was the primary factor creating conditions amenable to *zanimess*. The ardent pursuit of financial gain and land consolidation contested traditional standards prizing continuity, stability, and the division of land.

Those acquiring wealth in the new commercial economy were admittedly not an entirely different group of people from those who had dutifully passed land and title from one generation to the next. As Williams asserts, this new accumulation represented “the consolidation, the improvement, the expansion of an existing social class” (116). Still, they became *zany* in their need to balance the respectability and legitimacy granted by the old social order with the wealth made possible by the new, more overtly profit-centric order. The materialistic rapaciousness of the new conception of landholding created a degree of unease in the traditional link between the improvement of land and the improvement of morality and civilization. For Williams, this unlinking starts to develop in Austen’s novels, leading eventually to the nineteenth-century consciousness that “the two meanings of improvement had to be not merely distinguished but contrasted” (117). Characters like Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet express the crass, narrowly practical awareness of consolidation and accumulation representative of the new, coldly commercialist order. Neither has a typically bourgeois background, but they represent the shift in perspective created by the socioeconomic transformation Williams describes. These narrow viewpoints provide a difficult obstacle for Elizabeth. To ignore entirely the practical concerns they raise is no solution to the conundrum of

zaniness, but to blindly adopt these viewpoints would only calcify her own alienation.

In *Pride and Prejudice's* marriage plot, Elizabeth's eventual marriage to Darcy allows her to escape the precarious pressures of zaniness. The contradictory nexus of roles she has had to perform becomes insignificant. Because of Darcy's respectability and wealth, the strain crucial to Ngai's characterization of zaniness disappears. Elizabeth no longer need perform for others, twisting and contorting herself into alienating and limiting roles. Even her limited idea of herself disintegrates. She no longer plays the role of the sardonic, self-impressed intellectual who sharply judges the foolishness of others; she knows that she has been just as foolish in her initial misjudgment of Darcy. Instead of the disjointed alienation that characterizes zaniness, she finds an organic, harmonious sense of connection. The shallow opinions of Mrs. Bennet continue to proliferate, but they no longer bother Elizabeth, for they no longer carry any practical significance for her. Precarity ceases to be a fracturing force on her psyche, and she appreciates the first flickers of unhurried contentment as "the evening passed tranquilly away; there was no longer anything material to be dreaded, and the comfort of ease and familiarity would come in time" (419).

There is thus no juxtaposition between Elizabeth's internal desires and the roles she must play. When Elizabeth arrives at Pemberley, Austen emphasizes how Darcy's estate exhibits no empty ornamentation, as "a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance," with banks that "were neither formal, nor falsely adorned" (271). Darcy exists as an antithesis to the demands of artifice and inauthentic performance associated with the zany.

From a Williams-like, purely economic-historical perspective, Elizabeth's escape from zaniness is an escape from the turbulent upheaval created by Regency-era grasping commercialism. Because of his ancient familial wealth, Darcy can transcend the profit-centric accumulation that drives others. The chance to marry him is fortunate for Elizabeth but hardly a replicable strategy for escaping the pressures of zaniness. It is an individual (and fictional) solution, not a sociological one. More abstractly, although Elizabeth may not be motivated by the purely financial concerns that drive her mother and Mr. Collins, her actions on a plot level still exist to resolve those concerns. As Susan Fraiman argues, readings that "complexify" the "granted connubial bliss" of Elizabeth's marriage do not exist to "displace" that bliss (183). Elizabeth's zaniness traps her in disaffected disorientation, and she only finds a semblance of restfulness and psychological cohesion through her marriage

to Darcy. While escaping from zaniness on a societal level is not fully possible, Elizabeth escapes from it on a personal level, uniting her internal, organic desires with external, practical necessity and no longer needing to contort herself into restrictive roles.

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