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The Historicity of Jane Austen
Examining Courtship in Eighteenth-Century England

Courtney A. Weller
[May 2010]
For many decades, literary theorists and historians have debated the historical accuracy of Jane Austen’s novels and their differing perspectives have often kept the two disciplines from developing a full picture of the novels’ historicity. Yet, through examining both the historical reality of courtship and its manifestation in Austen’s works, historians can better utilize more of these primary sources. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* both document the coming-of-age courtships of aristocratic and other well-to-do women of the eighteenth century and offer glimpses of practices and ideologies behind certain facets of courtship.

Austen illustrates some of the very basic workings found in eighteenth-century courtship practices. Both *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* depict scenes in which young men and women meet and get to know each other through social events. In particular, a significant portion of *Northanger Abbey* takes place in Bath where many young people went to meet eligible young men and women. Such is the case of Catherine Moreland, the novel’s protagonist, who makes many trips to the Upper Rooms for social events.

In the traditional courtships¹ witnessed in Austen’s works, the influence of the family works throughout the courtship process, but the approval of kin or guardians is predominantly at the end of the courtship, between the betrothal and the marriage ceremony. *Northanger Abbey* shows the influence of guardians early on when Mr. Allen, Catherine’s guardian while in Bath, concluded that Mr. Tilney, Catherine’s love interest “was not objectionable as a common acquaintance for his young charge he was on inquiry satisfied; for he had early in the evening taken pains to know who her partner was, and had been assured of Mr. Tilney’s being a clergyman, and of a very respectable family in Gloucestershire.”² Upon asking Charlotte for her hand in marriage, Mr. Collins immediately goes to ask for the consent of Sir William and Lady

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¹ Not elopements.
Additionally, once Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy have proposed to their respective Bennet sister, the couples seek the consent of Mr. Bennet and to a lesser degree Mrs. Bennet. At the conclusion of Northanger Abbey, Mr. Tilney applies for Mr. and Mrs. Morland’s consent, which they give conditionally while withholding their official consent until General Tilney grants his approval.

It is also worth noting that none of the couples in Austen’s novels go outside of the traditional older male-younger female paradigm. Catherine Moreland and Henry Tilney are 18 and 26 years old respectively, and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are approximately 20 and 28 years old. Additionally, Austen and her characters are most concerned with men “taking advantage of young heiresses” who are naïve minors. A major theme with the character of George Wickham in Pride and Prejudice is his interest in young women: Georgiana Darcy, heiress to a fortune of £33,000, of whom Mr. Darcy explained in a letter to Elizabeth Bennet, “Mr. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune”; and Miss King, who gained Wickham’s attention upon her “sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds [which] was the most remarkable charm of the young lady.”

Austen interjects her own commentary on contemporary ideas about the courtship process as seen in Northanger Abbey when Austen writes:

for if it be true, as a celebrated writer has maintained, that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before a gentleman’s love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her.

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3 Austen writes that “Sir William and Lady Lucas were speedily applied to for their consent; and it was bestowed with a most joyful alacrity.” Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 83.
4 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 245.
5 Austen, Northanger Abbey, 240.
6 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 133.
7 Ibid., 133.
8 Ibid., 101.
9 Austen, Northanger Abbey, 52. In her footnote, Austen cites the statement was “Vide a letter from Mr Richardson, No.97. vol. ii, Rambler.”
Such a statement reflects the eighteenth-century idea that men were supposed to pursue women. Austen also illustrates the idea of the time that women were more inexperienced and therefore naïve in how Mr. Darcy explains his sister’s potential elopement on her age-based ignorance.\textsuperscript{10}

In many ways, courtship existed as a means to an end, with marriage being the hoped-for end goal for young ladies in Austen’s novels. In the opening chapter of \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, Mrs. Bennet immerses herself in the task of setting her daughters up for marriage: “The business of her life was to get her daughters married.”\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, Charlotte Lucas ponders that “marriage had always been her object.”\textsuperscript{12}

The motivation and ideologies behind courtship are described throughout \textit{Pride and Prejudice} and \textit{Northanger Abbey}. Austen maintains that balance between reason and emotional affection should exist when considering marriage. In many accounts Austen gives voice to characters who caution against marrying without a secure financial future. A letter from her Aunt Gardiner tells Elizabeth Bennet:

\begin{quote}
not involve yourself, or endeavour to involve him [Mr. Wickham] in an affection which the want of fortune would make so very imprudent. I have nothing to say against him; he is a most interesting young man; and if he the fortune he ought to have, I should think you could not do better. But as it is—you must not let your fancy run away with you. You have sense, and we all expect you to use it.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Later on Elizabeth acknowledges the necessity of economic stability when she responds to her aunt, stating that “handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain.”\textsuperscript{14}

Fathers too express a concern for pragmatic thinking by their children: in \textit{Northanger Abbey}, General Tilney is constantly preoccupied with his children finding matches of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{10}{For example, Darcy explains that Mr. Wickham “so far recommended himself to Georgiana…that she was persuaded to believe herself in love, and to consent to an elopement. She was then but fifteen, which must be her excuse…” Austen, \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, 133.}
\footnote{11}{Austen, \textit{Pride and Prejudice} 4.}
\footnote{12}{Ibid., 83.}
\footnote{13}{Ibid., 96.}
\footnote{14}{Ibid., 101.}
\end{footnotes}
advantageous economic standing. General Tilney arranges and encourages the courtship between his son Henry and Catherine until he learns that Catherine is not an heiress to a sizeable fortune, at which point he vehemently opposes the match. The General is later placated by the fact that his daughter Eleanor marries a Viscount, which allows him to consent to the marriage of Catherine and Henry since he realizes that Catherine, while not a future heiress, is from a background of no small income. Isabella Thorpe also acts on financial motivations, which Henry and Eleanor Tilney observe when teasing naïve Catherine by saying that Isabella will surely be constant in her affection: “Indeed I am afraid she will,” replied Henry; “I am afraid she will be very constant, unless a baronet should come in her way;…—I will get the Bath paper, and look over the arrivals.”15

Austen does, however, paint a more sympathetic picture of pragmatic marriage matches with the rather short courtship of Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in Pride and Prejudice. Charlotte, who was in her late twenties and nearing the age at which finding a suitor would be increasingly impossible, reflects:

Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband.—Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object: it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.16

For Charlotte, marriage and her own estate was the goal, and Mr. Collins, despite all of his unattractive qualities, could provide a secure future. Charlotte’s parents also approve of the match and give their consent “with a most joyful alacrity. Mr. Collin’s present circumstances

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15 Austen, Northanger Abbey, 203.  
16 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 83.
made it a most eligible match for their daughter…and his prospects of future wealth were exceedingly fair.”

Austen also implies that the conflict over marriage for affection verses money was not simply an issue of one generation pitting itself against the other, as is often thought by scholars. Charlotte Lucas explains that she does not care for love and romance when it comes to marrying Mr. Collins who is secured in his future. Charlotte explains:

I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.

Elizabeth later reflects that Charlotte had “sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage, criticizing her friends sacrifice. Charlotte is not forced into such a pragmatic marriage by her parents and despite her rationality in her decision, Austen hints through Elizabeth, and as readers later glimpse at Charlotte’s life, that a courtship which did not take sensibility into account was likely to fail to allow any type of joy in the relationship.

Austen also gives a fair amount of attention to courtships based around a sense of affection. Elizabeth Bennet, when debating with her Aunt Gardiner over the rationality of her feelings for Mr. Wickham, asserts:

…since we see every day that where there is affection, young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune, from entering into engagements with each other, how can I promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist?

Elizabeth herself, while leaning toward the necessity of reason in choosing a future spouse acknowledges the inevitable place of emotional inclination in the process. Mr. Moreland describes the general need for affection in *Northanger Abbey*, reflecting that Henry Tilney “had

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17 Ibid., 83.  
19 Ibid., 85.  
20 Ibid., 96.
not a single objection to start. His pleasing manners and good sense were self-evident recommendations; and having never heard evil of him…good-will supplying the place of experience, his character needed no attestation.”

Additionally, we see well-rounded attributes present in Jane Bennet’s description of Charles Bingley: “He is just what a young man ought to be,” said she, “sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manner!—so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!”

For some of Austen’s character, affefction was a necessity in marriage, not just a perk. For example, Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Collin’s hand in marriage despite the fact that the alliance would benefit her family and provide her with a secure future: “You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so.”

This, however, is witnessed in extreme with Lydia Bennet who overestimates her love for Mr. Wickham whom she intended to elope with to Gretna Green. Without consideration to the effect it would have on her family, status, or economic future, Lydia can only think of the “one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him.” While Wickham does not create the situation, he plays on her youthful innocence that allows her lack of worldly experience to further increase her susceptibility to seduction.

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen comments through the voices and actions of her characters on the issues surrounding courtship in eighteenth-century England. In addition to mentioning courtship practices in passing, Austen presents a look at the balance between sense and sensibility and its effects on courtship practices and partners. While illustrating the danger that relationships based either in extreme love or extreme pragmatism,

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23 Ibid., 73.
24 Ibid., 189.
Austen favors a balance between sense and sensibility. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* demonstrate the imbalance that occurs when romantic attachment or rational sensibility out-weight the other and Austen informs her readers to chose a sensible relationship, but not without trying to include some amount of sensibility.

**LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Jane Austen’s writings situated her directly between the reason centered Neoclassical Era and the more emotion centered Romantic Era. During this time of transition at the end of the eighteenth century, English men and women questioned the location of the fulcrum as society attempted to balance the weight of reason and the influence of emotion in human relationships.\(^{25}\) While all of Austen’s books were published in the early years of the nineteenth century, they are believed to have been written in the 1790s and the ideas presented in her works are generally agreed upon to be those of a traditional writer. Despite the fact that some of Austen’s characters present progressive ideas, contemporary literary analysis argues that such actions were not always in practice or worked in a way which assimilated with the conservative culture. This could be explained by the fact that Elizabeth Bennet desired to marry for love and affection, but at the conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice* she is able to marry the man of her dreams who is conveniently one of the richest men in England.

It is important to remember that Jane Austen is above all a writer of fiction. With that said, this fiction is contextual to eighteenth-century England and reflects the traditions and social mores of aristocratic and well-to-do women and men within that time. As Christopher Kent

\(^{25}\) Lecture, Dr. Crystal Downing, 27 February 2010.
explains, in the twentieth century "the question of what literature can or should tell us about society has been greatly complicated by the enormous growth in the academic profession of literary criticism, which has applied much seriously thought and ingenuity to the matter." Thus, it becomes important to determine if Jane Austen’s works can be claimed to have some representative value for contemporary courtship practices and ideologies.

Some critics, such as Graham Hough, claim that *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* are unreliable as a definitive source through which to view late eighteenth-century society. As Hough states:

> It would be foolish to complain that a quiet lady living in the country had no very comprehensive view of the political and social stresses of her time. But it would be equally foolish to suppose that the structure of her world is that of any actual segment of society in Regency England. That would be to suggest that pastorals are written by shepherds.

Despite her immersion in the eighteenth century and her familiarity with courtship through the lives of her siblings and friends, as well as herself to a certain degree, Hough argues that Austen is foremost a writer of fiction and therefore her works cannot represent a distinct event from the past. Some critics, such as Lionel Trilling argue further claiming that any well-done “serious history” would quickly prove that Austen did not reflect a real England. Both Hough and Trilling are correct in as much as Jane Austen did not set out to depict the historical reality of courtship in eighteenth-century England and it can be further argued that such argument helps to prevent readers from viewing Austen as a conscious historian. Kent points out the value of the

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28 Lionel Trilling, *Emma*, *Encounter*, 8 (Summer 1957), 57, 59. Trilling asserts that “the impulse to believe that the world of Jane Austen really did exist leads to notable error. Any serious history will make it sufficiently clear that the real England was not the England of her novels….All too often it is confused with the actual England, and the error of the identification ought always to be remarked.”
29 Kent, 91. Christopher Kent explains that "Trilling's heavily reinforced caution of the reader is understandable perhaps as a warning to those who might assume that Jane Austen conscientiously undertook to provide an accurate portrayal of a typically early nineteenth-century town.”
criticism in leading the reader to abandon the idea of Jane Austen’s England as a true representation or a complete survey of English life. He continues:

it is worth recalling that Jane Austen did not regard herself as an historian of her society...[and therefore] this gives her novels a peculiar interest and value to the historian as historical evidence, as historical documents, precisely because they are not self-consciously 'historical'. Because she has not tried to do the historian's work, to mediate and shape her world into something recognisably historical, she deserves the historian's attention and respect, even if she may mislead some critics.30

Instead, the reader must look at Austen’s world as not so much a replica, but a reflection of eighteenth-century England and the courtship practices of the aristocracy and well-to-do capitalists about whom she wrote, rather than a replica or snapshot of the past.

So if we can, in fact, look to Jane Austen’s novels in order to understand the lives of her courting contemporaries, what knowledge can we gain from reading her novels? Austen’s fiction is very much embedded in eighteenth-century England and reflects the traditions and social mores of the time: "It is no wonder, then, that her novels have come to be seen as the quintessential novels of manners, for no other early novelist dealt so carefully with the social behavior of a familiar group."31 Jane Austen was able to reflect the social customs, mores, and courtship practices in her works of fiction that, while not written with the explicit intention of portraying history, quite possibly did just that by integrating the truths of courtship practices and ideologies into her plot and dialogue.32

The Historical Act of Courting

30 Kent, 92-93.
32 It is also significant to note that Austen’s contemporaries saw her as portraying some aspect of the truth of eighteenth-century England. The Gentleman’s Magazine wrote that Jane Austen “…delineates with great accuracy the habits and the manners of a middle class of gentry; and of the inhabitants of a country village at one degree of rank and gentility beneath them” Emily Lorraine De Montluzin, Daily Life in Georgian England as Reported in the “Gentleman’s Magazine,” (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, c. 2002).
Courtship was a major event in the lives of many young men and women in eighteenth-century England. Marriage was expected of most, and courtship was the means to that end. "It was generally agreed in the eighteenth century that marriage was a woman's natural vocation. It was, in fact, regarded as the best road to happiness for both sexes." In other words, marriage was society’s only goal for a woman, it was what they were born to do; to date around frivolously would have been seen as impertinent. Similarly, for a woman of Jane Austen’s time, marriage was the woman’s chief role and the only way for a woman of the aristocracy or well-to-do capitalist class to support herself apart from continued dependence on the benevolence of her family.  

The act of courting consisted of three stages: the time before the man and woman were publicly acknowledged as a couple; the time thereafter in which they courted in the public eye, allowing the family time to get to know the suitors circumstances; the period after the betrothal and before the marriage ceremony characterized by negotiating the transactional elements of the union. During the first stage of courtship a man and a woman became acquainted and could be seen conversing or dancing at the occasional country ball or Assembly Room event. When a man began to call on a woman, this made the pair a couple in society’s eyes, in a type of pre-betrothal. They were considered to be seeing each other exclusively, but were not promised to each other and thus could end the relationship. The third and final stage began when the couple

34 Leroy W. Smith, “Mansfield Park: the Revolt of the ‘Feminine’ Woman” in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, edited by David Monaghan (London: Macmillan, 1981), 144. Smith supports this claim with the fact that a prominent problem in Pride and Prejudice is managing to land an advantageous husband. Additionally, Smith writes that “marriage is her chief means of support and the chief justification of her existence. As a result, getting a husband is her most important undertaking, and the disposition she makes of herself in marriage is the most critical event in her life” (144).
35 It is worthwhile to note that this stage was more retrospective, only recognized after a couple reached the second stage of courtship.
was officially betrothed. It marked the acceptance of a marriage offer by the woman and proceeded with the contractual arrangements between the man and woman’s families (pin money, etc). The length of these stages varied. However, with the introduction of the Hartwicke Marriage Act there were institutional time requirements (banns, licenses) which made the process at least a month long.

Urban towns and cities were popular for courting behaviors and public establishments arose to serve the “marriage market”. Bath and London became popular retreats during the social season, which lasted from April until early August, and places where young men and women could meet, with the particular advantage of meeting people from different counties. Aristocratic and well-to-do young people also had the opportunity to meet other eligible individuals at family parties and local dances and balls. Prospective couples could meet at court, in Bath, in the hunting-field, or even at events sponsored by church societies.

The arrangements that occurred after betrothal and prior to the wedding ceremony included the portion, which consisted of varied asses, from small sums of cash to household items, financial investments to land holdings. Amy Erikson gives an account of the range of portions with which women entered into marriage:

…women from the upper gentry and the lowest order of the titled aristocracy had portions between £1,000 and £5,000; those from the country gentry £100-£1,000; those from the ranks of clergymen, merchants and wealthy yeomen and tradesmen £100 to £500; from prosperous yeomen, tradesmen and craftsmen £50 to £100…

Bailey adds that “In general, however, a large disparity between spouses’ contributions to

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36 Convincing parents of the vitality and virtue in a match took different routes. Amanda Vickery explains that some tried to appeal to the father’s pity, declaring their desire to follow his will even if it means unhappiness, and as a result implying their misery is his fault. Amanda Vickery, The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England (London: The Folio Society, 2006), 49-50.


39 Ibid., 85.
marriage was fairly uncommon,” which hints that unions between and man and woman of drastically different socio-economic statuses were not typical.\textsuperscript{40}

During the eighteenth century the influence of family shifted from being stronger during the beginning of a courtship to later in the couple’s relationship. This change resulted from the fact that negotiations took place at the time of and following the betrothal which, during this time period shifted to the later part of the relationship, rather than at the beginning.\textsuperscript{41} In defining a marriage in the first half of the eighteenth century, Lawrence Stone illustrates three key aspects of a courtship: the written legal document constructed by the parents regarding financial arrangements, the spousals, which consisted of the formal vows given before witnesses, and the publishing of Banns or purchase of a marriage license.\textsuperscript{42} The role of parents in courtship during the eighteenth century underwent a great deal of change: “Negotiations and haggling over settlement now became the last step instead of the first, as the father of the bride decided upon the size of the marriage portion, and the father of the groom upon the appropriate current maintenance for the couple, as well as the jointure for the bride in the event of her widowhood.”\textsuperscript{43} Furthermore, the courtship negotiations involved the workings of entire families: “the demands of Georgian gentility were such that matchmaking amongst the propertied remained a lengthy and complicated process of negotiation involving a range of family and friends, rather than a simple matter of beating hearts and lovers’ vows” (44); thus, the kin involved with such marriage negotiations consisted of influential relatives, masters, patrons.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40} Bailey, 89.
\textsuperscript{43} Stone, \textit{Uncertain Unions}, 8.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 12.
In the process of courtship, women were expected to be chased. They were instructed not to show their feelings, opting instead for letting the man take the lead. A woman could not make her feelings known until she was sure of her suitor’s intentions.\textsuperscript{45} This, as some women were instructed, could be done through family or friends:

\begin{quote}
If a gentleman makes his addresses to you, or gives you reason to believe he will do so, before you allow your affections to be engaged, endeavour, in the most prudent and secret manner, to procure from your friends every necessary piece of information concerning him, such as his character for sense, his morals, his temper, fortune, and family; whether it is distinguished for parts and worth, or for folly, knavery, and loathsome hereditary diseases.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Men pursued women and women were only allowed the active capacity to say yes or no. Vickery offers the example of Robert Parker who, during his period of courtship, “enjoyed more freedom of manoeuvre than Elizabeth. Although he could not guarantee acceptance, he was at liberty to investigate, choose and offer.”\textsuperscript{47} While women, in most instances, were able to choose to accept or decline an offer of marriage or courtship, they had no substantial power of choice in starting such relationships. The men were at liberty pursue the young woman of his choice, and the women were left to handle the results of the man’s decision. Vickery further explains that “courtship was an invigorating challenge to manhood. Unquestionably, men enjoyed greater rhetorical license in the art and mystery of courtship. It was inappropriate for a woman to confess her sentiments until convinced of her suitor’s intentions.”\textsuperscript{48} As a result, the custom was that “demure reticence was obligatory, all peacock display was expected of the male.”\textsuperscript{49} It is interesting to think that “perhaps for the only time in her life, a woman was the absolute centre of attention, and often the protagonist of a thrilling drama.”\textsuperscript{50} In essence, marriage was a woman’s

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The Young lady’s pocket library, or parental monitor: An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to Her Daughters}, 49.
\textsuperscript{47} Vickery, 54.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 82.
\end{quote}
vocation. When looking at the life stages for women, courtship was, in many cases, one of the more empowering times.

Thus during the period of courtship women were served by men, turning the tables of the expected dynamics of marriage. For this limited time, the social mores flipped as men pursued women and women were left to pass judgement. The man, in pursuing the woman made a conscious effort to be subservient to the woman’s desires. This is not to say, however, that all women were docile creatures when it came to courtship. Roy Porter suggests that many ladies, particularly those in more urban areas, were less submissive than generalizations suggest and that “many happily colluded in men’s games of clandestine flirtation and conquest,” possibly due to the increased competition created by such a populated area. Additionally, aristocratic and well-to-do women could actively participate in their courtship process and had more bargaining power. Porter’s assertion leads towards the value in considering that what was expected of men and women in courtship was not what was experienced.

Cultural Influences on Courtship

During courtship there were central aspects to a respectable woman’s and man’s character: for women, purity was a necessity, and for the man, trustworthiness of word. Women were expected to exude virtue, particularly regarding chastity. In An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to Her Daughters, the author explains that “I was indeed early and wisely taught, that virtue was the one thing necessary…” and that it was “the source of happiness, of glory, and of

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51 Vickery, 44.
52 Ibid., 46.
53 Porter, 25.
54 Ibid., 25.
55 Parental Monitor, p. 58.
peace.”56 Katherine Rogers explains that “so vital was chastity that a woman must constantly preoccupy herself with preserving its very appearance—avoiding any company, any reading, any actions that could arouse suspicions of her sexual purity in the narrowest mind.”57 It was very much the case that women were expected to retain their virtue, which was very closely linked with their physical purity, in order to seem more desirable for potential marriage partners. One eighteenth-century commentator went as far as to say that one “can never be happy but by virtue” and that “Anxiety always follows the loss of innocence; but virtue is ever attended with an inward satisfaction…”58

One reason for such a strong emphasis on the female virtue of purity was its linkage with issues of inheritance and estate. A woman with a questionable sexual past, or rather any sexual past, was deemed not as trustworthy and capable or likely to have future extramarital affairs. As women were the assurers of the purity of inheritance, such affairs could place inheritances in contest. A woman’s virtue was one more warranty (guarantee) that the children she bore were her husbands, and thus rightful heirs to the family legacy.59 Roy Porter echoes such sentiment, explaining that “a husband would not contemplate a cuckoo in the nest, nor would he wish to bequeath his property to a son unless he was sure of paternity.”60 The higher the stakes were in a marriage, in other words the more wealth exchanged, the more a woman’s virtue and chastity was valued and considered.61

56 Ibid., 135.
58 Parental Monitor, 142.
59 Virtue was also key in that a pure bloodline was needed for the heir. This was inevitably one sided as the woman was held to higher standards when it came to physical purity, because she bore the child and therefore the paternity of the child, and rightful heir, could be disputed.
60 Porter, 25.
Men on the other hand were expected to have a trustworthiness in regard to their word. A man who was known to be lax in keeping his promises was more apt to dissolve a betrothal or go back on his word regarding agreements made in the marriage contract. This was a key worry given the damage that could befall a woman should a man break his word, specifically if the couple had engaged in sexual behavior.

**Economic Influences**

Economic factors played a large role in who was allowed to court whom and when men and women were allowed to court. Elizabeth Kennedy wrote in 1801 “that when poverty comes in at the door love flies out at the window.”

Inheritance was a driving factor for the gentry of the eighteenth century and informed two of the key issues that affected the success of a potential couple: genuine affection and whether or not the couple were marrying for compatibility and love rather than money or status; and whether or not the couple came from a similar status. Being from the same socio-economic class meant the potential for marrying a social climber was lessened. Marrying a man or woman significantly below your own status raised questions of intent: was your partner marrying you because of compatibility and love, or more because they could benefit from your position in society? Erica Harth explains that, “Spectacular ascent often required the magic want of patronage, a fortunate marriage or a chance inheritance,” which left marriage as the most practical way to increase one’s status and fortune.

England also experienced the rise of capitalism in which bulk commodity trading emerged and there was an increase in the global economy, profoundly effecting courtship. Erica

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62 Vickery, 40.
63 Harth, 51.
Harth explains that “with the social transformations of early modern capitalism, it became urgent to promote marriage, as the moralists wished to do, and to promote the right kind of marriage, as the legislators in Parliament joined the moralists in wishing to do.”64 Advice literature reflected on the capitalist nature of courtship and its promotion of the woman as a commodity. With the increased circulation of capital during the eighteenth-century issues of morality began to arise regarding the affects of money, particularly as it affected courtship and marriage.

Capitalism, which burgeoned most in urban areas, ushered the establishment of institutions in cities such as London and Bath that catered to helping young men and women meet. With the increase in travel for business matters, couples began to meet in London and Bath, and other cities with large populations. With the rise of capitalist ventures in urban areas, cities became increasingly attractive as meeting places for eligible young men and women.

As a result of capitalism, liquid assets and investments became as important as status and land. This particularly resulted in the blurring of social statuses,65 the use of capital to purchase land (thus increasing the rapport between business men and aristocratic families), and, most importantly, the increase of the likelihood of marriages between peers, gentry, and well-to-do capitalists. Money spoke volumes and the aristocracy, some facing issues due to large amounts of assets but little liquidity.

Economic influences also contributed to the appeal of a potential spouse. Amanda Vickery explains that “wealthy and rank had an intensely romantic, as well as mercenary appeal.”66 Marriage based on economic factors was not seen as completely adverse, influenced by the introduction of the thought that a virtuous love would help in preserving social and sexual

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64 Harth, 154.
65 Ibid., 136.
66 Vickery, 43.
order among the aristocracy and well-to-do capitalists.\textsuperscript{67} In fact, “marriage was the principal means by which landed families extended their estates,”\textsuperscript{68} which made economic motivation for pursing marriage a key theme to be considered throughout courtship. Additionally, it was not just parents that harbored such concerns, as children also took into account the pragmatics involved in courtship, which hinders any belief that a preference for union based on socio-economic factors laid solely with parents and relationships based on love were the ideal for the young men and women entering relationships.

\textit{Demographic changes}

A series of demographic changes also affected courtship during the eighteenth century, such as a marked increase in the population of England which was noted to have started around 1750. With this increase in population also came the trend of young people marrying earlier and, as a result, having more children.\textsuperscript{69} One reason for a decreased average age of marriage was the rise of capitalism which allowed men to gain independent means to supplement or replace their family inheritance. Since men preferred marrying women younger than them, with fertility being a key factor in such reasoning, the result was that the age of marriage for women also decreased.\textsuperscript{70}

Population increase also led to the need for men to seek their independent fortune in urban areas. Having lost out on receiving much of the family legacy due to the policy of primogeniture, younger sons were encouraged and economically forced to make their fortune in

\textsuperscript{67} Harth, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{70} Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 323.
the larger cities, particularly London. Once in the city, young people met up at balls, concerts and plays and courtships began to broaden in geographic scope; instead of marrying someone within the same county, young men and women were meeting spouses from across the country.

Political Influences

The political realm was also undergoing change during the eighteenth century that would have profound affects, both directly and indirectly, on courtship. In 1753, Parliament passed Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act, which greatly influenced the landscape of courtship in England. Prior to this law “Any sort of exchange of promises before witnesses which was followed by cohabitation was regarded in law as a valid marriage.” 71 The law forbade marriage for children under age 21 without parental consent and also required the publishing of Banns within the church or the purchase of a special marriage license, and as a result invalidating private verbal marriage agreements. Erica Harth explains that “The bill incorporated the existing regulation that about a month intervene between the first calling of the banns and the wedding. The rationale for the stipulation was that this interval was long enough for people to reflect maturely on their decisions.” 72 Additionally, prior to Lord Hartwicke’s Act, it was difficult to define what did and did not constitute a marriage. 73 This was increasingly a problem when considering that “a claim, true or false, to a secret pre-contract, supported by bribed witnesses, was an irritatingly easy way for a child to block a marriage arranged by parents, to which he or she was averse.” 74

The Marriage Act was predominantly concerned with the seduction of heiresses and the prevention of allowing young women, viewed as inexperienced and easily taken advantage of, to

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71 Stone, Family Sex and Marriage, 31.
72 Harth, 133.
73 Stone, Family Sex and Marriage, 34.
74 Ibid., 35.
marry before they could make informed and responsible marriage decisions. Joseph Sayer, a supporter of the Act, questioned “How should the inexperience of a young girl over head and ears in love [sic] which has in all ages been described as blind, be able to judge of the reality of the person’s passion she would marry?” M.P.s were preoccupied with the fact that young women (particularly of the gentry and aristocratic classes) were able to enter into marriages too easily, sometimes through elopements, and such actions resulting in unions that were binding, and thus detrimental to the socio-economic status of the young woman’s family. Thus those that supported the bill considered themselves to be valiant fighters against the immoral scandal of deceiving women and ultimately protecting marriage from faked and manipulated emotion.

However, as with any law, there were those who sought to evade the restrictions placed on them by The Hardwick Marriage Act. Due to the law’s jurisdictional limit being within England, some young couples eloped to Scotland where more informal marriage ceremonies could be performed. Due to the misfortune that could arise from an elopement, or one gone wrong, it was expected that courtship would be practiced under the gaze of the public eye. Clandestine relationships were seen as risky ventures for young people, particularly women who were naïve as a result of not experiencing the world.

**PRIMARY SOURCE EVIDENCE**

*Abigail Gawthern*

In her diary, Abigail Gawthern recounts events of her life based on the pocket journals she kept throughout her life. Gawthern does not comment much on issues of romance or love

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75 Harth, 135.
76 Ibid., 142.
between courting or married couples, however, she does note occasions in which young women of her acquaintance eloped with men:

Miss Platts when to Gretna Green with Mr. Maddock, a surgeon, Jan 11; they returned the 18th. 77

Miss Betty Cheslyn eloped with Captain Langley of the 7th Dragoons, Dec 3; Mr. John Wright attended her to the Leen Bridge and handed her into the carriage to Captain Langley. 78

Aug 23. Miss Drury Lowe set off for Scotland with Mr Holden; they were married again at Spondon in Derbyshire, Sunday the 31st, the lady was 17 last Feb; she is the daughter to Mr Drury who was with Messrs Allen & Roe; he has since taken the name of Lowe. 79

Miss Dickenson of Muskham sat off to Scotland with a Mr Hall of Nottingham, Nov 11; he is a worthless character, she the eldest daughter of Mr. Dickenson, banker with Pocklington & Co of Newark. 80

Abigail Gawthern’s diary gives insight into the state of some of the young women who felt the need to elope: they were often young, single women of the gentry class that resorted to marrying across the border in Scotland, where the Marriage Act of 1753 would not have been effective. Additionally, they all married men of the gentry class, one of which Gawthern mentions though as being of “worthless character”.

Gawthern does mention her husband a handful of times during her entries from the eighteenth century. Abigail, an heiress of the upper gentry was married at age 25 to Francis, a white-lead manufacturer eight years her senior. 81 Yet, Francis is mentioned predominantly in regards to his gifts to Abigail:

Mr. Gawthern gave me a beautiful watch paper cut with a pair of scissors at Matlock, Apr. 23. 82

78 Ibid., 50.
79 Ibid., 83
80 Ibid., 134.
81 It is interesting to note that this historical example veers from the norm of couples marrying while young. One reason for this could be that Abigail did not receive the first of her significant inheritances until she was 21 years of age.
82 Gawthern, 34.
Mr. G[awthern] presented me with a most beautiful pair of gold earrings, Sunday, April 8.\textsuperscript{83}

Mr G[awthern] presented me with an elegant watchchain and pocket book, Oct. 14.\textsuperscript{84}

Abigail also mentions her husband’s participation in a financial arrangement in which it appears he took out a loan which was probably paid back with the money he acquired upon marrying Abigail:

Feb 24. Mr Gawthern received of Mr Martin Bird six guineas, to pay him on his marriage twenty pounds, for which Mr Gawthern gave him his note of hand.\textsuperscript{85}

It is possible that such financial transactions (in which loans were to be paid off following a marriage) were financed with money acquired from dowries. Gawthern does not use romantic language or refer to her husband much throughout the diary, and her notation of her marriage is less than emphatically affectionate:

Mr. Gawthern and myself were married at St Peter’s church by the Rev Jeremiah Bigsby, Mar 6, we were the first couple he had married since coming to be rector of St Peter’s church.\textsuperscript{86}

\textit{Richard Shackney}

The \textit{Journal and Diary of Richard and Elizabeth Shackney} gives evidence of more affectionate marriages, although it must be noted that whether the unions began with mutual affection or whether such affection arose as a result of the marriage is up for debate.

The religious influence on the Shackneys is witnessed throughout the \textit{Journal} and appears in reference to the marriages mentioned. In a letter to his wife, Richard Shackney writes

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Gawthern, 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 41.
\end{itemize}
that “I trust it is the Lord, the God of our fathers and forefathers, even the Lord who I believe
was with us in joining us together in his holy ordinance.” Additionally, Shackney comments on
the importance of a match being blessed by God in a letter to his wife regarding their son’s
marriage ceremony: “Surely if this connexion was not of the Lord, surely his power would not be
so evidently felt in the solemnization of it.”

Shackney’s two marriages seemed to be slightly different in the timing of affection;
whereas love is mentioned to be present in his first marriage seemingly from the beginning, his
second marriage has the appearance of beginning as a friendship which grew into romantic
affection. Yet a degree of love appears in his second marriage nonetheless, as Richard signs
many of his letters with affectionate phrases such as: “Farewell, my dear love; and be assured I
am, with increasing affection, Thy truly loving husband.”

Shackney additionally comments on his daughters’ marriages and makes note of their
spouses: Richard saw his daughter Deborah’s husband as “a worthy, a sensible, and a religious
man,” and his daughter Margaret’s husband as a “very worthy, honest, active [read:
entrepreneurial] man, who is an affectionate husband, a good father, and prosperous in
business.” Interestingly, Shackney praises his daughter’s on making well-rounded matches that
are both sensible and emotionally favored, showing that having both is deal.

Conduct Manuals and Advice Texts

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88 Shackleton, 115.
89 Ibid., 98-101.
90 Ibid., 132.
91 Ibid., 133.
The various conduct and advice texts of the eighteenth century give much insight into the mindset of mentors regarding the ideas and practices of courtship during this time. For some, these conduct manuals existed as a way to preserve conservative thinking on issues such as courtship; for others, however, advice texts promoted a new line of thought, one which sought to change the hegemonic opinions of the majority. James Thompson illustrates that “the practice of female education remained focused on courtship, while the ideology of romantic attachment, which is supposed to be natural and spontaneous, necessarily contradicted the need for rules and instruction, art and artifice…” which strengthens the applicability of conduct manuals to 18th century courtship.92 It is important to note, however, that conduct texts are limited in their historical helpfulness since they reflected the ideals, rather than concrete evidence of social practices.

They type of advice on courtship that was available through conduct texts was varied. For some, such as Philogamus, who worked under a pseudonym thought it necessary to “deny children freedom of individual choice in finding a mate. But he urged parents to make sure that the future spouses loved one another because he saw the loveless marriage as lacking in virtue.”93 Other texts, such as that of An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to her Daughters, gave more practical advice when it came to courting practices, rather than courting ideologies:

I do not think public places suited to make people acquainted together: they can only be distinguished there by their looks and external behavior; but it is in private companies alone where you can expect easy and agreeable conversation, which I should never wish you to decline. If you do not allow gentlemen to become acquainted with you, you can never expect to marry with attachment on either side-love is very seldom produced at first sight, at least it must have, in that case, a very unjustifiable foundation. True love is founded on esteem, in a correspondence of tastes and sentiments, and steals on the heart imperceptibly.94

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94 *Parental Monitor*, 46.
CONCLUSION

It has been seen that Jane Austen reflects the historical context in which she wrote her novels and can be utilized by historians to some degree. Austen presents a historically informed narrative which shows the affects of the political, cultural, and economic influences that played into courtship practices and ideologies. However, it is important to realize that these novels do not tell the whole story as historical research shows that courtship during the eighteenth century was complex and varied.\textsuperscript{95} As a result the importance of increased dialogue between Literary Theorist and Historians remains high, with a continual and updated transmission of ideas. Such action will allow historians to better utilize Austen’s works as primary sources and will allow literary historians to further delve into the meaning and value of Austen’s works.

\textsuperscript{95} For example, Austen fails to address sexual relationships between betrothed couples, or even courting couples.
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