"To hear your voice": Analyzing Choice and Consent in Jane Austen's Proposal Scenes

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In 1848, author Charlotte Brontë wrote that she would never wish to live in the "confined houses" of Jane Austen's literary world (qtd. in Menand). In 2023, many contemporary readers would say the same: Austen's universe appears to be defined by antiquated institutions that its traditional female characters never break free of, given that each heroine marries by the end of her novel. However, the truth is far more complicated. Austen gives her female protagonists the ability to choose—to refuse or accept a marriage proposal, and effectively decide their future—at a time when society rarely afforded women this power in any real way. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (1814), and Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* (1816) exercise a progressive amount of agency by only accepting offers of marriage from men who respect them as autonomous beings: Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins and accepts Mr. Darcy, Fanny rejects Mr. Crawford and accepts Edmund Bertram, and Emma rejects Mr. Elton and accepts Mr. Knightley. Each woman refuses to enter a relationship in which their voice is not heard, even when this match would benefit them socially and economically. In allowing the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma* to prioritize their personal desires and demand marital relationships based on mutual consent and affection, Austen uses these three novels' proposal

scenes to create feminist narratives that imagine a more egalitarian future for women in the early nineteenth century.

In the 1800s, society expected women to conduct themselves with extreme propriety, mildness, and gratitude when responding to proposals of marriage. Educational conduct books, like James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), outline how society instructed women to modestly "temper" their behaviour and keep their thoughts a silent and "profound secret" during the Regency era (Fordyce 371; Gregory 376-377). Essentially, nineteenth-century culture told women to put their suitor's dignity and desires before their own and be grateful for any offer of marriage that they were lucky enough to receive. Women, especially those who were of a lower class or without "a very peculiar good fortune," could not expect to marry someone for whom they held great "esteem or affection" (Gregory 378-379). Marriages were relationships based on finance and status, not emotions. These ideas are the conventions that Elizabeth, Fanny, and Emma reject. Rather than silently acquiescing to whichever man first shows them some degree of preference, these Austenian heroines daringly choose to wait and marry for love.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth exercises her power of choice—and, in doing so, expresses her desire for a progressive, consensual relationship—by refusing the disrespectful advances of Mr. Collins. As the clergyman set to inherit the Bennet estate, Mr. Collins possesses the money and occupation that would enable Elizabeth to live a modest but comfortable and respectable life. In spite of this prospect, though, the heroine declines his proposal. Francesca Marinaro discusses how

Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins not merely because he is inane and ridiculous, but because he holds no respect for her as an "agent of consent" (162, 169). The language and manner of Mr. Collins's proposal clearly demonstrates how the clergyman views women "as possessions rather than as consensual participants in marriage" (162). Instead of starting an open conversation with Elizabeth, Mr. Collins begins a solo speech. He stakes a "presumptive claim" on the Bennet sister and lists his reasons for choosing her as a wife, all of which egocentrically revolve around his personal happiness (Marinaro 162; *Pride and Prejudice* 121). Bolstered by the norms of his patriarchal society, Mr. Collins is confident that Elizabeth will gratefully accept his proposal, so much so that he does not give her an opportunity to respond to it. But, Elizabeth refuses to stay silent; she interrupts Mr. Collins to reprimand his behaviour and asserts her voice, declaring, "You are too hasty, Sir…You forget that I have made no answer" (*Pride and Prejudice* 122). Even once Elizabeth states that she declines his offer, Mr. Collins does not listen. He dismisses her as unserious with a condescending "wave of the hand" and a presumption that "young ladies [often] reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept," infuriating the heroine (123). She implores Mr. Collins to hear her and understand that she is "perfectly serious" in her desire to not marry him: "You could not make *me* happy" (123). That Elizabeth, knowing her decision could lead to a future of impoverished spinsterhood, refuses to accept Mr. Collins underscores the importance of mutual consent and affection in Austen's world (Marinaro 172). The author does not allow her heroines to enter into nonconsensual marriages of convenience with men who disrespect their autonomy and disregard their rational thinking.

Along with Mr. Collins, Mr. Darcy highlights how Austen demands a man who values women's consent for her heroine in *Pride and Prejudice* through his first and second proposals to Elizabeth. Comparing Mr. Collins's offer to those of Mr. Darcy reveals the key reason why Elizabeth accepts the latter man: he learns to respect her "power of choice" (Marinaro 158). In his first proposal, Mr. Darcy's behaviour mirrors that of Mr. Collins. With "no doubt of a favourable answer," Mr. Darcy states that Elizabeth "must allow" him to express his feelings, "forcing rather than requesting her attention" and thereby silencing her voice (*Pride and Prejudice* 185-186; Marinaro 169). Again, this presumptuous behaviour enrages Elizabeth. In a frank manner that defies Regency-era social conventions, Elizabeth asserts that she feels no sense of gratitude or obligation towards Mr. Darcy: "I have never desired your good opinion" (*Pride and Prejudice* 186). She challenges his arrogant and entitled behaviour, asking how he could be so bold as to expect her to accept him after implying "her inferiority" and declaring that he liked her "against [his] reason" (185-187). As Heather Nelson posits in her 2020 article, Elizabeth scolds "[Darcy's] mode of assuming her consent." By cultivating a scene in which this action is possible, Austen progressively imbues her heroine with the same amount of agency as her hero and, accordingly, underlines the value of women's thoughts, feelings, and voices. Though Mr. Darcy would provide her with an even wealthier future than Mr. Collins, Elizabeth refuses to accept a man who will not respectfully hear her.

Elizabeth only accepts Mr. Darcy once he corrects his mistakes and demonstrates his efforts to respect her boundaries during his second proposal. In this scene, Mr. Darcy places an emphasis on the heroine's free "*will*" (*Pride and*

Prejudice 318). He clarifies that she "[owes him] nothing" and, in doing so, gives her space to give or withhold consent in a way that neither he nor Mr. Collins did earlier (318). Demonstrating his notable character development, Mr. Darcy "solicits Elizabeth's consent…before referring to his own" (Nelson). He pleads to know whether she still despises him, for though he continues to love her, he will not force her to reciprocate his feelings: "[O]ne word from you will silence me on this subject for ever" (*Pride and Prejudice* 318). In making this declaration, Mr. Darcy assures Elizabeth that, regardless of her decision, he will listen to and respect her. Evidently, Mr. Darcy is no longer "desirous of bending Elizabeth's will to his" (Marinaro 173). He offers her an "egalitarian" partnership built on love, not convenience or obligation, and for this reason, Elizabeth responds positively to his proposal, receiving it with most "pleasure" (Nelson; *Pride and Prejudice* 319). Clearly, in allowing Elizabeth to wait for a man who readily listens to her voice, Austen creates a narrative in *Pride and Prejudice* that envisions a more progressive world for women.

Austen also envisions a more progressive world for women in *Mansfield Park* through Fanny's proposal scenes. Fanny exercises her power of choice—and, in doing so, exhibits her wish for a mutually consensual relationship—by refusing the unreciprocated advances of Mr. Crawford. Similar to Mr. Collins, Mr. Crawford expresses his "excessive and unequalled attachment" to Fanny without any consideration for whether she shares his sentiment (*Mansfield Park* 307). Though Fanny "twice draw[s] back her hand" from him, Mr. Crawford does not listen (308). He ignores the heroine's displeasure and "press[es] for an answer," forcing her to be

blunt with her refusal: "Don't, Mr. Crawford, pray don't" (308). While Fanny may, as June Sturrock suggests in her 2001 introduction to *Mansfield Park*, be less "assertive" in her verbal rejection than Elizabeth, she is equally "unshakeable" in her determination to "act in her own interests" (14-15). Fanny is not interested in Mr. Crawford. Therefore, she has no desire to marry him. His attempts to make her feel "infinitely obliged" to him do not sway her decision (*Mansfield Park* 309). In this way, Fanny defies nineteenth-century social conventions in her rejected proposal scene just as much as Elizabeth does in hers.

Like Elizabeth, Fanny's social and economic status is extremely vulnerable. Marrying a wealthy man like Mr. Crawford would greatly benefit her as a woman from an impoverished family. However, Fanny refuses to marry a man whom she does not feel any affection for. When her uncle, Sir Thomas, questions her about why she rejected Mr. Crawford, Fanny replies, "I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him" (*Mansfield Park* 321). Sir Thomas's subsequent condemnation of his niece as "wilful and perverse," and filled with "*ingratitude*," confirms the rebelliousness of the heroine's actions (323). In asserting her voice, Fanny "resists [her society's] patriarchal values" (Sturrock 22). Evidently, like Elizabeth, Fanny would rather sacrifice "being settled in life" than submit herself to a loveless marriage in which her desires would go unheard (*Mansfield Park* 324). She knows that she and Mr. Crawford "could never make [each other] happy," and so, she rejects a future with him (325). Clearly, in Austen's universe, a person's status as a woman, "and more critically, a woman without rank or fortune," does not "exclude [them] from exercising personal autonomy" (Marinaro 171). Fanny's refusal of Mr.

Crawford, and the reasoning behind it, exemplifies how Austen subverts nineteenth-century social conventions by enabling her heroines to prioritize their desires over their reputation and the will of their patriarchal society.

Contrasting Fanny's refusal of Mr. Crawford with her acceptance of Edmund Bertram further exhibits how Austen subverts social norms by allowing her heroines to demand marital relationships in which there is mutual consent and affection. Like Mr. Darcy, Edmund demonstrates his respect for his heroine's boundaries by listening to her voice and offering her an equal marriage built on love, rather than obligation. For these reasons, Fanny welcomes his proposal instead of Mr. Crawford's. Edmund expresses his feelings for Fanny without "soliciting a return" of them in the way that Mr. Crawford does (*Mansfield Park* 308). Though Edmund is inclined to believe that Fanny will reciprocate his love, he still asks for her "blessing" and "encouragement" (466). Importantly, Edmund never assumes Fanny's "silence as consent" (Nelson). He longs to hear her verbal affirmation, and he is delightfully "astonish[ed]" when he finally receives it (*Mansfield Park* 466). Edmund values Fanny's opinion of him very highly because he—again, like Mr. Darcy—views his heroine as an equal to himself. This attitude, while expected in relationships today, was not required for marriages in the Regency era. At a time when society instructed women to quietly hide their intellect and protect men's dignity, Edmund openly recognizes "Fanny's mental superiority," acknowledging that she is "only too good for him" (Gregory 377; *Mansfield Park* 466). Edmund does not "condescend" to Fanny, unlike the other men in her community, and the young woman feels drawn to him as a result (Sturrock 13). In giving Fanny the space to

choose a husband who, as William Magee suggests, "appreciates her worth and loves her as a person," Austen challenges nineteenth-century social norms to demand "an increased respect of men" for the women they wish to be with (203-204). In this way, Austen conceives a more egalitarian future for nineteenth-century women in *Mansfield Park*.

Just as Austen imagines a more progressive future for women through the proposal scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, the author also envisions a radically feminist future through the proposal scenes in *Emma*. In her novel, Emma exercises her power of choice—and, in doing so, establishes her insistence on an equal, even advantageous, marriage—by boldly rejecting the unwanted and, therefore, inappropriate advances of her neighbourhood clergyman, Mr. Elton. Quickly after escorting Emma into his carriage, Mr. Elton takes advantage of the enclosed space and imposes himself on the young woman while they are alone: Emma finds "her hand seized" and "her attention demanded," as Mr. Elton suddenly begins "making violent love to her" (*Emma* 149). Once again, like Mr. Collins and Mr. Crawford, Mr. Elton treats Austen's heroine "not as the agent of consent, but as the object of his affection" (Marinaro 168-169). In seizing and demanding her, Mr. Elton shows no respect or regard for Emma as an autonomous being. With an air of patriarchal entitlement, he does not consider that the heroine has a choice in responding to his proposal or even reciprocating his sentiments, "flattering himself that his ardent attachment…could not fail of having some effect" on her (*Emma* 149). Though Emma plainly attempts to "stop him," Mr. Elton does not listen, for he is "resolved on being seriously accepted" (149). His refusal to accept Emma's rejection

and his presumption that she is not serious in declining him thoroughly anger the heroine, just as Mr. Collins's and Mr. Crawford's behaviour frustrates Elizabeth and Fanny (150). Emma is so insulted by Mr. Elton that she abandons any polite pretenses of gratitude that her society expects her to perform and exclaims, "Believe me, sir, I am far, very far, from gratified in being the object of such professions" (Gregory 378; *Emma* 150). Emma rejects the idea that she would appreciate Mr. Elton treating her like an object, and in this way, she rejects nineteenth-century social conventions in a similar fashion to Elizabeth and Fanny. Because Emma is wealthier and, therefore, in a slightly less vulnerable position than the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, she takes less of a risk when she declines her suitor's proposal. However, the frankness of Emma's behaviour was still unacceptable in the Regency era, as Mr. Elton's reaction to it illustrates: "Good heaven!" (*Emma* 150). In having Emma respond to a marriage proposal in such an unapologetic manner, Austen redefines what Denise Kohen calls the "ideals of 'ladyhood,'" with assertive self-assurance replacing passive selflessness. Because Austen enables Emma to refuse a man who disregards her voice and autonomy, the author highlights the importance of men honouring the consent and desires of women in *Emma* just as much as she does in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*.

Austen clearly illustrates what a relationship based on mutual consent and affection looks like in *Emma* through Mr. Knightley's proposal to the heroine, which wildly differs from that of Mr. Elton. Emma accepts Mr. Knightley—just as Elizabeth accepts Mr. Darcy and Fanny accepts Edmund—because the gentleman exhibits an unmistakable respect for the young woman's voice and boundaries that indicates his

view of her as a moral and intellectual equal to himself. When proposing, Mr. Knightley asks Emma a question that invites her to participate as an "agent of consent" in their conversation: "Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?" (Marinaro 169; *Emma* 365). Mr. Knightley does not assume that Emma will accept him. He tells her, "Say 'No,' if it is to be said," and when she cannot find the words to reply, he takes her silence for refusal, not "ample encouragement" like Mr. Collins, Mr. Crawford, and Mr. Elton (*Emma* 365, 150). Opposite to these men, Mr. Knightley recognizes his heroine's word as important. He wants to hear her decision, whether it be consent or dissent, just the same as Mr. Darcy and Edmund: "I ask only to hear, once to hear your voice" (366). This progressive display of respect is visibly important to Emma, as it fills her with a "glow of attendant happiness" (366). Like all of Austen's female protagonists, Emma wants a husband who treats her as an equal, and Mr. Knightley works to meet this requirement. He apologizes for the times in which he has adopted a "paternal role" over Emma, recognizing that his judgement is no better than hers: "I do not believe I did you any good" (Kohen; *Emma* 389). He also gives up "his own place of authority" and chooses to move into Emma's house, for her benefit, upon their marriage: "[So long as] Hartfield continued [to be] her home, it should be his likewise" (Kohen; *Emma* 379). These decisions cast Mr. Knightley not as Emma's dominating husband, but as her equal "companion" and "partner" (*Emma* 380). In this way, Emma has a happy ending in which she gets to keep what women typically lost in nineteenth-century marriages: her independent identity (Kohen). Thus, Austen clearly fosters a feminist story in

Emma by enabling her heroine to choose a man who respects her autonomy, rather than submit to one who does not.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*, Austen uses her heroines' proposal scenes to imagine a more egalitarian future for nineteenth-century women in which they—like Elizabeth, Fanny, and Emma—can prioritize their desires, demand relationships built on mutual consent and affection, and have their voices heard. By writing romance novels in which her female characters go against the social norms of their time to denounce the disrespectful, unreciprocated, and inappropriate advances of the men that their society pressures them to marry, Austen skillfully transforms the traditional marriage plot "into a criticism of the life allotted by her society to young women" (Magee 207). Elizabeth, Fanny, and Emma possess very little freedom in their worlds. But, Austen brazenly rejects the notion that they are powerless. Each heroine takes charge of their future and chooses to wait for a partner who honours them as an autonomous being. In giving Elizabeth, Fanny, and Emma successful endings with Mr. Darcy, Edmund, and Mr. Knightley, Austen rewards and thereby validates that choice. The author does not permit her women to acquiesce to a future that they have no voice in. For this reason, her novels are anything but "confined houses" (qtd. in Menand).

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