Money, Female Attractiveness, and Marriageability

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Throughout her novels, Jane Austen pays considerable attention to small-life economics. That is not to say that her small-life analyses are simply thought out, but rather to claim that with an economic lens, she looks through to the rest of society, and suggests how one factor, such as pounds per annum, effects all other aspects of life:

The way we make money and use money tells a social and ethical tale about us – that is hard to mistake. Just as Adam Smith spent many pages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* telling us that human beings have a great capacity to feel for others, and that money-making cannot be separated from these broader social concerns, so too Jane Austen illuminates the ethical complexities of economic life. (Wilkes, 2010, 33)¹

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* does not deal with money subtly, and themes of monetary and moral wealth permeate each page. However, in taking these important themes and applying them, as Austen did, as a lens to other spheres of social life, one may comprehend many of the nuances of Austen's England. The essay will address how wealth affects perceptions of female beauty and worth, inevitably in the name of the marriage trade, for marrying, in itself, was a business. In analyzing Austen's female characters as measured by their income, beauty, and accomplishments, we understand their marriageable worth -- a scale Austen surely must have critiqued, since Mr. Darcy fell in love with Elizabeth. But yet it is clear that one comes to recognize that perceptions of beauty and accomplishment are changed by the mere existence of material wealth.

To begin looking at the relationship between wealth, beauty and judgment one must first accept that:

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¹ Wilkes, 2010, 33
Fashion accompanies high rank, and marks it out for social judgment. Similarly, physical beauty has a social dimension of judgment attached to it through custom. It gains its value through the same principle of social judgment that decides on what is fashionable and what is not. (Wilkes, 2010, 5)

Indeed, common sense may conclude that people will often judge others by style or quality of dress. But physical beauty, if it gains value by the same social judgment as fashion, is equally connected to marks of rank and income. Therefore, in moving forward, one assumes that wealth affects perceptions of beauty. In the case of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, who are ‘reputed beauties’ within their country communities, one may argue the notion. They are poor, relative to the gentry, and have low connections (i.e. family among the lower gentry), yet are repeatedly acknowledged as handsome; angels and beauties - Jane, especially. Not surprisingly, most of these compliments are from people of similar economic and social backgrounds. When Charles Bingley's party arrives, he is the only one to perceive beauty within the community, perhaps because he desires the sweetness of country life and its simplicity:

The manner in which they spoke of the Meryton assembly was sufficiently characteristic. Bingley had never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in his life; everybody had been most kind and attentive to him; there had been no formality, no stiffness; he had soon felt acquainted with all the room; and as to Miss Bennet, he could not conceive an angel more beautiful. Darcy, on the contrary, had seen a collection of people in whom there was little beauty and no fashion, for none of whom he had felt the smallest interest, and from none received either attention or pleasure. Miss Bennet he acknowledged to be pretty, but she smiled too much.' (Pride and Prejudice, 16)

For Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley, and Mr. Darcy, country society recommends little of interest; all distinctions of fashion, rank and propriety, income, marks of superior elegance, accomplishment and moral education are absent -- by this count, it would indeed be difficult to find beauty in such a place. And despite Miss Bingley's personal motivations to attack and criticize Elizabeth's worth in order to secure Mr. Darcy for herself, there is a seriousness of purpose beyond self-interest behind Miss Bingley's definition of beauty and marriageability.
When dinner was over [Elizabeth] returned directly to Jane, and Miss Bingley began abusing her as soon as she was out of the room. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty. Mrs. Hurst thought the same, and added, "She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker." (Pride and Prejudice, 35)

Once more sensing Darcy's attachment to Elizabeth, Miss Bingley continues:

"For my own part," she rejoined, "I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliancy; and her features are not at all handsome. Her nose wants character -- there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I never could perceive anything extraordinary in them. They have a sharp, shrewish look, which I do not like at all; and in her air altogether there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable." (Pride and Prejudice, 271)

Despite her obvious prejudice against Elizabeth, Miss Bingley's attempts at abuse establish her own priorities on the beauty scale. Repeatedly, she stresses importance upon having an "air" of beauty--which one may assume comes down to being an individual of rank or wealth, raised to carry oneself with the pardonable pride of superior birth and circumstance.

But what of Jane Bennet? Jane represents a woman of identical birth, and economic and social circumstances to her sister, but she is removed from the Miss Bingley/Elizabeth rivalry. It is interesting to note that, while the Bingley sisters accept Jane as a friend, she is never described by either as a beauty. Nor is she anyone recommendable to a man of wealth or superior circumstances.

Mrs. Hurst and her sister allowed it to be so; but still they admired her and liked her, and pronounced her to be a sweet girl, and one whom they should not object to know more of. Miss Bennet was therefore established as a sweet girl, and their brother felt authorised by such commendation to think of her as he chose. (Pride and Prejudice, 17)

More than once, the sisters determine that Jane is a "sweet girl," not to compliment her, but to dismiss her and her angelic qualities as nice, but unthreatening. Certainly, in their opinion, Jane has nothing to offer to a marriage, despite her beauty. Miss Bingley's overt abuse of Elizabeth
may betray her jealously, but her opinions against Jane are no less severe. But, in this case, the
sisters are passively set against Jane. Whatever animated admiration Jane inspires in Mr.
Bingley, his sisters (not contradicting him) do not volunteer similar opinions of her. She is sweet,
not beautiful. She is well mannered, but with embarrassing connections. Mrs. Hurst began again:

"I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet; she is really a very sweet
girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a
father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no
chance of it." (Pride and Prejudice, 36)

Money, connections, and associations of birth are inescapable qualifications required to make a
good match in marriage. Her beauty is lessened by her inability to secure a rich husband. While
there still remains a bias on behalf of the Bingley's sisters, (for they would, too, suffer from low
connections) their inability to acknowledge Jane's otherwise renowned beauty proves that they
use the word discerningly, toward ladies with more to offer than pleasing physical features.

Beyond the physical, "a beauty" needs something greater to recommend herself in
marriage -- something irreversibly linked to the opportunities that money provides. In essence, a
woman must be accomplished. Mr. Darcy, for much of the novel, thinks in similar terms:

"Your list of the common extent of accomplishments," said Darcy, "has
too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it
no otherwise than by netting a purse or covering a skreen. But I am
very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general.
I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range
of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished."
"Nor I, I am sure," said Miss Bingley.
"Then," observed Elizabeth, "you must comprehend a great deal in your
idea of an accomplished woman."
"Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it."
"Oh! certainly," cried his faithful assistant, "no one can be really
esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually
met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music,
singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the
word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her
air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and
expressions, or the word will be but half deserved."
"All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet
add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by
extensive reading." ...
The list of accomplishments offered by Miss Bingley, and reaffirmed by Mr. Darcy, present a sizeable hurdle for any lady from a family of low income or limited society. The shock which emanates from Lady Catherine De Bourgh, when she learns that the Bennet sisters neither draw, nor play music with proficiency, (nor did they have a governess to teach them such things) supports the notion of wealth supporting marriageability beyond the material attractions of a dowry. Wealth supports accomplishment, which supports the potential to marry well, which therefore leads to attractiveness.

To compare the Miss Bennets to women of economic superiority, the novel offers three figures. The first will be addressed but briefly: Miss Mary King, who takes Mr. Wickham's attentions away from Elizabeth, does so by inheriting £10,000. Since there is no indication of Wickham's attraction to Miss King other than the practical need for money, she will be considered no further. The two other women, Miss Georgiana Darcy and Miss Ann De Bourgh tell us more about the issue of perceived beauty and accomplishment in women. Says Miss Bingley in a letter:

I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments; and the affection she inspires in Louisa and myself, is heightened into something still more interesting, from the hope we dare to entertain of her being hereafter our sister.
(Pride and Prejudice, 118)

Here, again, Miss Bingley exhibits a bias in favor of Georgiana, to secure her as a sister and strengthen ties to Mr. Darcy. Indeed, she embodies Miss Bingley’s notion of beauty, an attribution she refuses to give Jane. What Jane lacks in elegance and accomplishment, she simultaneously lacks in fortune and education. What Miss Darcy has, by comparison, is a
countless list of qualities to recommend her to any respectable man, all of which are influenced by her economic status, since she is not a lady of rank.

Austen, using Miss Ann De Bourgh, provides an example of a lady with combined rank and income. Even Mr. Collins, a clergyman fortunate in the patronage of Lady Catherine De Bourgh, is sensitive to the differences in beauty between his cousins and ladies of rank. He considers his cousins to be exceedingly handsome, but his compliments toward them do not compare with those for Miss De Bourgh:

"She is a most charming young lady indeed. Lady Catherine herself says that, in point of true beauty, Miss De Bourgh is far superior to the handsomest of her sex; because there is that in her features which marks the young woman of distinguished birth. She is unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her making that progress in many accomplishments, which she could not otherwise have failed of; as I am informed by the lady who superintended her education, and who still resides with them. But she is perfectly amiable, and often condescends to drive by my humble abode in her little phaeton and ponies." (Pride and Prejudice, 67)

What is interesting is that Miss De Bourgh is not an accomplished woman, nor is Lady Catherine, particularly. All that is recommendable in them is breeding and wealth. Mr. Collins is a man heavily influenced by, and respectful of, England's hierarchy, in gratitude for his happy patronage. However, the opinions he shares are merely part of the broad character of a man who is recognizably the stupidest in the novel. As Mr. Collins, the dunce, presents these high compliments of beauty, excuses a lack of accomplishment, and acknowledges a capacity for accomplishment that must exist in ladies of superior rank and circumstance, Austen cleverly argues against the idea. Similarly, Miss Bingley's opinions are clearly jaundiced by the mere fact that she is a rival of the novel's heroine. Thus, Austen clearly identifies, and intentionally addresses with criticism, a society caught up in an idea of beauty that is inseparable from wealth.

There is one character whose perceptions of beauty change through the course of the novel. Mr. Darcy, who first comprehends a great deal in the idea of accomplishment (and
therefore, as earlier determined, in beauty as well) eventually comes to see Elizabeth as "one of the handsomest" women of his acquaintance. How does this change come about? After first being introduced to Elizabeth, Mr. Bingley starts:

"But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you."

"Which do you mean?" and turning round, [Darcy] looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me." (Pride and Prejudice, 11-12)

From what he then knew of Elizabeth's character, there was certainly nothing to attract him. But as he sees more of her, he begins to discover something unpleasantly contrary to the ideas he was raised to believe: a conscionable pride in superiority of mind and accomplishment, which in turn is attractiveness itself, all predetermined by one's birth, connections, and wealth. When, against his will, he begins to see beauty in Elizabeth, there is mortification:

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. Of this she was perfectly unaware; to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable nowhere, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with. (Pride and Prejudice, 23)

Beauty and intelligence, without fashion or accomplishment? Mr. Darcy is the exception to society's rule, and is reluctant to come to this new conclusion. Eventually, in falling in love with Elizabeth, he changes his views, and becomes a voice of true moral understanding and superiority of mind, not because of his wealth or situation, but because of his ability to overcome
his original assumptions. Eventually, he comprehends more in the notion of beauty than his peers can. Elizabeth starts:

"My beauty you had early withstood, and as for my manners - my behaviour to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now, be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?"
"For the liveliness of your mind, I did." (Pride and Prejudice, 380)

Thus, following this new logic, a woman without competitively grand accomplishments, wealth or connections can be considered beautiful for her mind and character. Further, this woman is able to secure a man of no small fortune.

From this conclusion arises a new connection between beauty and virtue separate from wealth, for, "fashion and moral sentiments are connected." Austen deliberately lets the novel's hero come to these conclusions, in a positive way (i.e. he falls in love with the economically poor, relatively unaccomplished, beautiful and clever heroine). In contrast, Austen's prodigiously faulted characters make a connection between beauty and virtue, dependent upon wealth.

"Whereas many of the better virtues are timeless, the fashionably bad behaviour of those of high rank can set the tone for the rest of society, and harm its well-being." (Wilkes, 2010: 5)

These are ideas that must be harmful to society, and Austen makes that a clear argument in the novel. According to Austen, a mortification and a change of perspective similar to that of Mr. Darcy (who, after all, is almost unanimously agreed to be her most noble hero) is exactly what society needs.

**Bibliography**


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