Context of *Pride and Prejudice*

The number and kind of jobs available, especially for women, were far more limited then than they are today. Remember this was in the days before Information Technology. It was in the days before radio, television, telephone, electricity. Almost any job that a person leaving school today is likely to be thinking about as a career probably didn’t exist when *Pride and Prejudice* was written.

The only respectable paid work open to a gentlewoman, i.e. of the class to which the Bennet family belonged, was the job of lady companion or of governess. Fancy being Mrs Jenkinson, Miss de Bough’s companion, always having to be pleasant to that boring little hypochondriac and always under the thumb of Lady Catherine!!! It might not be unpleasant to be governess to the little Gardiner children or to the large family that you may be sure Jane and Mr Bingley would produce but even in such kindly households as these, a governess lived in a room close to the schoolroom, was on duty 24 hours a day, had, perhaps, a week’s holiday per year and earned between 10 and 20 pounds per year. Of course she had her board and keep but you wouldn’t get rich on that salary, nor could you do much to plan for your retirement and if you did not have agreeable and considerate employers your life could be very miserable indeed. The only other honourable occupation open to girls such as the Bennets was marriage and even here it was pretty hit and miss.

Once a girl married her property became her husband’s. It was almost impossible for a woman to get a divorce even if her husband beat her, misused her money, was constantly drunk, was unfaithful or neglectful. She could only sue for divorce if her husband brought his mistress to live in the marital home. That was why it was so necessary for marriage settlements to be drawn up. A Marriage Settlement was a legal document drawn up before the marriage took place guaranteeing that the bride would have a certain sum “settled” on her i.e. she was entitled to the interest from that money during her lifetime and that money could be willed to her children. A marriage settlement also clearly stated what she would be entitled to if she were widowed or what would happen to any money she brought into the marriage were she to predecease her husband. The amount of a girl’s marriage settlement was usually determined by how much money she brought into the marriage, i.e. her dowry or jointure. If the husband were very wealthy he might supplement this as Mrs Bennet expected Mr Darcy would do when she spoke of how much “pin money” Elizabeth would have (Pride and Prejudice, III, 17, p.300). If a girl eloped and was married without a marriage settlement any money that had been legally hers at the time of the marriage became the property of her husband without any safeguards on how he could use it. He could disappear the next day and the girl could be left penniless. Does this give you some idea of the enormity of what could have happened if George Wickham had successfully eloped with Georgiana Darcy? Can you see how important it was that Lydia Bennet should have money settled on her before the wedding took place? Elopement was not just a moral lapse but also a most imprudent step. A man who would talk a girl into eloping with him was not a gentleman according to the code of conduct of the time because by eloping he was ruining the girl’s reputation and, even more importantly, he was profiting financially by preying on her innocence and ignorance of the world.

Notice that George Wickham is only interested in single girls with money. He is not so silly as to run off with a rich married woman. Apart from the fact that her money would be so tied up through the marriage settlements that he wouldn’t be able to get his hands on it easily, if a married woman ran off with a lover her husband could sue him. You see, legally a man’s wife was his property. If another man illegally used his property, i.e. his wife, she became “damaged goods” and the husband could take out a civil suit against the lover and could get quite a lot of money in damages based on rank and fortune, length of marriage, whether the men had been friends etc. The husband could get as much as 10,000 pounds to sooth his wounded pride. These civil actions were between men only. An injured wife could not get such compensation if her husband ran away with his mistress.

The Bennet girls had no brother. If they had had a brother he would have inherited the family property but he would also have been obligated to keep under his roof his mother and all the unmarried sisters and provide them with an allowance as well as bed and board. This would have affected his own chances of marriage, as he would have had the expense of keeping his mother and sisters as well as his wife and any children he might have. And if you were a young woman considering marriage, would you really want to share your home with Mary Bennet practising her scales and Mrs Bennet suffering with her nerves? Do you see now why Charlotte Lucas’s brothers were so “relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte’s dying an old maid”?

Austen was acutely conscious of the cost of living and the price of everything, including the price of matrimony. So perhaps I should now give you some idea of the cost of living. One pound in 1810 had roughly the same purchasing power as $A100 today. This is a rough estimate and you also have to realise that there were periods of rapid inflation and recession as the Napoleonic Wars, which so closely followed the American War of Independence, provided a very unstable economic period throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Since Mr Darcy had 10,000 pounds per year his income today would be somewhere near one million dollars per annum. Of course from that he would have the upkeep of Pemberley and his living quarters in town as well as those of his sister whose London establishment would have been separate from his own. He would also have had many calls on his purse of the “noblesse oblige “ kind, but you see that he was, indeed a good “catch”.

Another thing to remember is that some things that are very inexpensive today were extremely expensive at the beginning of the 18th century and some things that were necessities then, are completely unnecessary today.

Travel is a good example. You could not expect to keep a horse and carriage unless you had an income of at least 1,100 pounds p.a., i.e. about $A110,000. In today’s world you can own a car if you are earning much less than that, but feeding and stabling a horse and paying the wages of a groom were more expensive than paying the registration, insurance and petrol for a car. Do you see why Mrs Bennet thought that Mr Darcy was too proud to talk to Mrs Long because she came to the ball in a hack chaise, i.e. in a taxi? (Pride and Prejudice, I, 5, p.25) Mrs Long’s income would not have stretched to owning a carriage.

Clothing was also very expensive. Remember that everything had to be hand made, as sewing machines did not come into general use until the 1880s. Shoes, stockings, hats and gloves for men and women had to be purchased and were expensive. In 1811 a pair of silk stockings cost 12/-, or $A60 in today’s terms. Men’s shirts and underclothing were sewn at home but their other clothes had to be bought, as they required tailoring rather than plain sewing. Women’s clothes were made at home or by a dressmaker (called a mantua maker) who would charge about 2 pounds ($A200) per garment. The industrial revolution had reduced the price and increased the quantity of fabric available for sewing but you needed about 6 or 7 yards of fabric to make a dress and the cheapest fabric cost the equivalent of $A15 per yard, so even if you made the dress yourself it would cost about $A100. There was much remaking of old clothes. When fabric faded the dress was often unpicked, “turned” and resewn so that it looked fresher. There was also much dying of old dresses, retrimming of hats and coats and when the use-by date of outer garments had eventually come they were often unpicked and remade into undergarments. We read of the Bennet girls retrimming hats. You may be sure that they resorted to other clothing economies too. We know that one of these economies was to retrim their dancing shoes. (Pride and Prejudice, I, 17, p.79)

Whalan, Pamela, 2002, *Jane Austen Society of Australia: Study Guide: Understanding the society in which Jane Austen sets Pride and Prejudice*, <http://www.jasa.net.au/study/indivsoc.htm>, 07/11/2012