

Not Sorry Works

Hot & Bothered, Live from Pemberley

His Manners Gave Disgust (Chapters 3 + 4)

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Vanessa: [00:00:00] It's time for the first of three balls that will take place in *Pride and Prejudice*.

[Soft, plucked string music begins to play.]

Vanessa: At this one, the assembly ball, we and the Bennet women don't just finally meet Mr. Bingley, but we and they also meet Bingley Squared: Darcy. Twice as handsome and twice as rich, Darcy has a lot of potential, but Darcy isn't even liked for a full sentence. By the end of his introductory sentence and half of the evening, his manners gave disgust. Mr. Bingley is liked a great deal. He is handsome and kind and dances with Jane twice. He dances with Charlotte Lucas once. And some other women too, but also only once. He is having a great time and he wants his friends to have a good time, too. And he's brought Darcy as his guest and Darcy isn't having fun. So Mr. Bingley asks Darcy why Darcy won't dance with Elizabeth, who's sitting this dance out due to a lack of men. Darcy responds, quote, "She is not handsome enough to tempt me," and that he doesn't want a woman who no other men want. [Music stops.] Here is Miriam Burstein, chair of the English department at SUNY Brockport. She'll be taking us back to that first sentence of the novel that we talked about last week but putting it in the context of our two main heroes, Bingley and Darcy, who we meet in the chapters that we've read for today.

Burstein: [00:01:37] I mean, that moment, "it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," I just finished teaching this book last semester and you'd have to say to the class, "Well, wait a second. Who's saying that? For whose truth is it?" Because it doesn't actually seem to be Mr. Darcy's truth. He doesn't actually seem to be going out looking for wives or even Mr. Bingley's, right? The men in the book are not actually out [Laughs] doing the looking. They're kind of waiting for the women to come to them. You know, when you think about who the truth is universally acknowledged by, it actually seems to be the mothers. And the daughters. The men seem to be a little vague on that concept.

[Music begins again.]

Vanessa: [00:02:24] To Professor Burstein's point, Bingley seems open to being seduced, good sport that he is. But Darcy, despite all his money, status, and good looks, isn't open for business, which is a kind of false advertising for the women of town, and so our Virgil of the mothers of Hertfordshire, Mrs. Bennet, calls him a poor sport and writes him off. Part of what is fascinating about this scene in which we meet Darcy is that despite his riches and status, because he's rude, he is shunned, at least temporarily. For all the husband-hunting, status-seeking, and money-grubbing that these women are accused of being engaged in, they might not actually be willing to throw their daughters at just any rich man under any circumstance. You might hear us repeat this a lot, but it's so important. This, and many romance novels in its wake, is a novel that may be more about economics than about love.

And that conversation did not get left at the ballroom door. *Pride and Prejudice* takes place in a very specific economic moment in British history. Here is Professor Ayesha Ramachandran, associate professor of comparative literature at Yale University.

[Music fades off.]

Ramachandran: [00:03:48] So we're looking at what is now called the Industrial Revolution, where the increasing urbanization of major towns across England and Europe essentially means that more and more younger sons, for instance, who do not have prospects within the landed gentry, now have the possibility of entering into these various money-making enterprises. This is, of course, being fueled by the rise of empire, land overseas that then drives and creates the need for increasing infrastructure around the stock market, around lawyers, around other kinds of service, what we would now call the service industry that manages the engine of making money that still is being generated by land, just not land in England. It's just land overseas.

Vanessa: [00:04:31] As I've mentioned before, when *Pride and Prejudice* was written and released, slavery was still legal on all levels in England. And that doesn't just matter on a human rights level. It means that there is a lot of money in families where there wasn't before. England has violent access to a ton of free labor and they are getting rich off of it. Austen is famous for writing small novels, highly localized. But this is one way in which empire has gotten its tentacles quite clearly into the assembly ballroom. Sir Lucas, a man who has made his money in trade, is now titled because of his money, and there is a feeling of the possibility of upward mobility that allows people like Mrs. Bennet to shun people like Mr. Darcy, who a generation before would have been a white whale of a catch. Here is Elsie Michie, professor of English at Louisiana State University, on how that context keeps *Pride and Prejudice* relevant for today.

Mitchie: [00:05:39] I think it's the sort of novel that comes out of the beginning of capitalism that's about what happens in a world where people start to value money. And I think because we still live in that world, right, because that's the questions Austen's novel asks about money and things like that, those are still questions for us, right? And so I think it feels like it's still talking about the world that we live in.

Vanessa: [00:06:06] There might not be ethical consumption under capitalism, but one of the ways to read Austen is that there is no ethical love under empire, slavery, capitalism, or patriarchy. The marriage mart on full display in this assembly boardroom is built on English soil in more ways than one. When Mrs. Bennet and the five daughters get home from the ball, they are excited to tell Mr. Bennett everything. Mr. Bennett is excited to mock them and not really listen. Then Jane and Lizzy have chapter four to themselves. They do the post ball debrief. A few things are decided. Mr. Bingley is falling in love with beautiful Jane. Jane is open to the possibility of falling in love back.

[Intro synth music begins to play.]

Vanessa: Bingley's sisters, Mrs. Hurst and Caroline, are very elegant but aren't as well mannered as Bingley, and Mr. Darcy is not suitable for marriage at all. I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Lauren: [00:07:14] And I'm Lauren Sandler.

Vanessa: [00:07:15] And this is 'Live from Pemberley' from *Hot and Bothered*.

[Music intensifies with added percussion before fading off.]

Vanessa: Lauren, what would you like to tell us about before we get into our conversation specifically about these chapters?

Lauren: [00:07:35] So in these pages, we read the word 'pride' for the first time. We're going to read it 43 more times than this book. But this is our introduction to both pride and not coincidentally, also to Darcy. Darcy is, of course, who represents pride in this book. And I think it's worth taking some time to think about what that word meant to Austen and to her readers. You know, right now we think of pride as something that can be really positive, right? You can be proud of yourself. You can be proud of an action. But at the time, pride was something that was not just synonymous with vanity and arrogance. It actually carried a lot of weight. It carried the weight of sin. Pride was considered the most original and serious of all of the seven deadly sins. It was considered almost demonic within the Anglican Church. Augustine said it was pride that changed angels into devils, where it was humility that made men into angels. And Aquinas saw inordinate self-love, which was the definition of pride at the time, as the cause of every sin, that the root of pride, he said, is found to consist in man not being in some way subject to God in his rule. And so this accusation of Darcy as being prideful and our introduction to Darcy as being prideful is a very, very serious accusation and one that, of course, through this introduction, through meeting Darcy at the ball, we definitely see manifested not just in something that is being said about him, but in his behavior. I mean, it's like a major turnoff. It's the reason that Lizzy dismisses him. It's the reason that even Mrs. Bennet says, you know, whatever this fortune is, this is not a man for my girls.

It's also worth noting, I think, as much as Austen had already written this word into this book so many times and had it synonymous with Darcy, she hadn't initially chosen it as the first word of the title of this book. She had initially titled this book *First Impressions*, which of course our first impression of Darcy is that he is prideful. That is also important. But it turns out by the time she was able to publish this book, there was another popular book that already had this title. As someone who writes and published books, I can tell you this is a very common and very particular pain to have someone else take your title before your book is published. And so she had to come up with a new title, and she reached back into a book that she had read called *Cecelia or Memoirs of an Heiress*, by a celebrated author at the time named Frances Burney – this is a female Frances – and who had written this book, which in many ways is sort of an inverse of *Pride and Prejudice*. I admit I have not read it myself, but I have read about it enough to know that Austen was writing *Pride and Prejudice* in conversation with a lot of the sort of plot twists and moralism of Burney's book. And so she pulled from the last section of this book, this language, which was a common term at the time, 'pride and prejudice'. But Burney uses it three times in this one passage, which I will read you from the end of *Cecilia*, and writes 'pride and prejudice' in all caps. I mean, she's really flagging it. And Burney says this: "The whole of this unfortunate business has been the result of pride and prejudice. If to pride and prejudice you owe your miseries so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to pride and prejudice you will also owe their termination." And so talking about pride in terms of Darcy is something that we have to pay close attention to because it is going to be what his

whole character and indeed what this whole love story hinges on, what it means, how we feel about it. And if all narrative is about change, what will change for Lizzy, for Mrs. Bennet, and for us as readers as we take the journey of this book?

Vanessa: [00:11:52] I mean, like, it makes me wonder because religion is such a small part of this book, if, like, Austen is trying to secularize this idea and say a certain level of pride is actually baked into patriarchy, I think that's just going to be something we can unpack continually. But the fact that she doesn't bring it up at all in the context of sin, I think is, at minimum, remarkable.

Lauren: [00:12:17] I love that secular reading because what we will end up seeing is that it is not fixed in the way that we think that sin is fixed.

Vanessa: [00:12:24] Oh, absolutely, this book about the ability or inability to change. Lauren, one of the questions that we want to be tracing throughout this book, in particular because of the way that Austen writes, is who the chapter thinks is ridiculous. And I'm wondering if you think that the chapter thinks Darcy is ridiculous.

Lauren: [00:12:45] Oh, totally. His pomposity, his foppishness, his sense of himself. It is completely absurd to me. It's almost campy. And I think that, honestly, it's something that I have a hard time ever coming back from for the rest of the book, because he's so ridiculous in ways that I find so off-putting that it's hard for me to ever come around to him again. Do you think that this book finds him ridiculous in an introduction to him?

Vanessa: [00:13:13] I am very torn about it. The idea that, like, I only want to talk to people in my own party and I don't really like meeting new people. I really resonate with that. You know? So I just think that there's a way to argue that Darcy's being a good sport to Bingley by going to this event that he would choose not to go to. It also sounds like he's very awkward and I have tremendous sympathy for that. But that said, there is something ridiculous, and I know this within myself, about going to a ball to only talk to the people you came with. Right? Like that is not why you go to a ball. So I think the text is laughing at him to some extent. And I get it.

Lauren: [00:14:00] I'm sitting here thinking about the term 'ridiculous'. And, you know, I really want to keep that term open and a little vague as we talk about it every other week. But there is this element of being ridiculous, which is absurdity that can be painful. And then there's an element to it which feels like comic silliness. And I feel like often we read ridiculous as comic silliness. I find myself so hurt and offended by Darcy that I can't even read the silliness in him as much as I find the ridiculousness in him and that – that I wonder if it's just because I feel my own experience of being at parties or having curiosity about whether someone would want to dance with me, both literally and metaphorically. And if – if there can be so much pain and so – so much familiarity in reading these scenes that I feel a wound more than I'm able to laugh it off the way that Lizzy does.

Vanessa: [00:15:02] So Lauren, I think that the specific moment that we're both sort of talking about is this moment where Bingley goes up to Darcy and makes the excellent point of like, you're at a ball and there are women and I can introduce you to the women. Don't you want to dance? And Darcy first asks, "To who?" Which opens the possibility that there are some

people who you would want to be introduced to. And then he – he turns around and he looks at Elizabeth, catches her eye, and then turns away. And this is what he says to Bingley: “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me. I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.” And one of the things that's so interesting is that Elizabeth goes off and says that, “she tells the story with great spirit among her friends, for she had a lively, playful disposition which delighted in anything ridiculous.” So Lizzy calls it ridiculous, this moment. And I'm wondering what you think Lizzy finds ridiculous. Is it the rudeness? To me, it's her finding it funny that she overheard it and trying to take control of the narrative and, like, be in control of how it's seen.

Lauren: [00:16:15] I do think that she's trying to take control of the narrative, and I think she's doing it in this incredibly charming way and self-protecting way. I must say, for all of Lizzy's aspirational qualities, we might be meeting her, in this moment, and the one that is most aspirational to me.

Vanessa: [00:16:33] Yeah, absolutely.

Lauren: [00:16:34] If I could learn how to do this, if I could learn to just think that this is hilarious, turn it into a great story, you know, and be done with it? Fantastic. I mean, I love turning moments like this into great stories, but that's definitely masking some sort of inner pain and offense. And we don't really get the sense that she's doing that. I think in part because...his arrogance, his pride is so extreme. So we're reading the Oxford version together, and in it there are italics under the word ‘me’, right? He says, “she's not handsome enough to tempt *me*.” In other words, she might be fine for not just these country rubes, but even you, dear Bingley, you new moneyed rube yourself. But I – I am Darcy. And there's something about that that just, like – it gets my neck snapping, and it's like, “All right, honey, you think you're all that? We're going to take you out on this one. We are just going to go to town on this absurd bit of arrogance.” It's almost a spit take that you want when you hear him saying that. And so I think that that's the humor. There is also this element, though, where he's saying what it means to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. I don't know that that's what she's responding to, because I think that that's actually this dangerously incisive reading of what women are worth in the economic model of the ball. Right? So these men come in and somehow, I still can't figure out why, we know *exactly* how much money they all have in the bank, we know exactly what they're getting per year and where it's coming from. What women are worth is how other men are treating them. And I feel like as much as he is being trotted off to market with his 10,000 a year or whatever, Lizzy is being trotted off to market in terms of how she is being valued by the other possible suitors in the room. On the other hand, I think that this is exactly how we all work as humans. This is what every ball is like, every prom, every dance, every time that, like, you have eight kids hanging out, getting pizza and wondering who's worth what to whom. Like, this is the economy of desire. And I do think that there's something that is probably a little bit painful in there for Lizzy, especially as she is trying to think about what her future is going to be.

Vanessa: [00:19:10] Lauren, I have sort of two, two responses and they are diametrically opposed to one another. One is, I was just reading up on the real estate market in Boston and essentially what the theory of this article was was that houses have no inherent worth, right? Like we could add up how much each beam is and whatever, but a house is only worth what people will pay for it. And so the only way to figure out how much your house is worth is to

put it on the market. And I think that that is true for Lizzy, right? Part of what going to this ball is, is figuring out your sense of worth on the market. And we know that Lydia and Kitty danced every dance, and Lizzy did not get asked to dance every dance. And so comparatively to Kitty and Lydia, her stock is down. And I think that that is a really hurtful thing to see. However, that said, and I do think that that is absolutely a huge part of what's going on here, I do think that there's an alternative way to read the second part of the sentence. "I'm in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men." I think that it is partially her worth and also that it's not my job to babysit someone just because she was slighted by another man. That, like, I am not the, like, pity brigade. And, you know, we know how Austen feels about this because in Emma, Mr. Knightley is seen as a hero simply for asking someone to dance when another person won't dance with her. So we know that this is a gesture that means a lot to Austen. But I also, again, just see Darcy's point of view and I'm hammering in on this just because I don't think Darcy has been shown to us as utterly unforgivable. I think he is being shown to us as 80% jerk but there is this wiggle room of he doesn't really want to talk to people outside of his party. And I can imagine in a certain frame of mind being like, it's not my job to dance with someone just because nobody else will dance with them. I don't want to dance. The thing that to me makes the stakes of this higher from 80% jerk to potentially 99% jerk is whether or not you think that he knows she can overhear him. And that is what is really confusing to me. He would be a monster if he thought that there was any chance that she could overhear him. And they – they make eye contact! [Laughs.] And so I'm like, "Ahh! How do you not know this??" And it's something that I find really interesting because in every movie adaptation of this, they have it so that there is no way Darcy could know that Lizzy was hearing this. But I find it very ambiguous within the novel, and I'm wondering what you think of that.

Lauren: [00:21:50] It's true, in the adaptation, she's always squirreled away somewhere.

Vanessa: [00:21:54] Right, on the other side of a door or whatever.

Lauren: [00:21:57] Exactly. But in Austen, he meets her eye in the middle of this. And then he turns away and says this. He turns away coldly from her eye, from the eyes that he's going to fall in love with. I mean, this is going to be the guy who, for hundreds of years, women are saying, "I just want to find my Darcy." I'm just going to, like, throw that gauntlet right now in episode two because I'm going to be beating that drum hard for the rest of this whole podcast. My prejudice is the thing that needs to be reformed here, perhaps because to me it's all on the page and this is not the guy.

Vanessa: [00:22:39] So to me, like, what is potentially pernicious about setting this as the meet-cute between the most famous romantic couple in literature is the idea that there is something really special about a guy who hates every other woman but loves you. He's a jerk to everyone, but not to you. Not when you're alone. He's a jerk when you're in public, but in private, he's kind. It is really troubling, right, and is pitting women against each other in the exact way that we've been talking about, you know, that Lizzy's worth is only worth so much if other people want her and all of these really horrible macroeconomic ways. But also, I just think it's bad for women's psyche. Right? Like you are going to ally yourself with somebody whose natural disposition is a lack of kindness and be like, "Oh, but he's nice to me and that means I'm special." And so that I think is the real downside of this meet-cute. But I do think that one of the arguments throughout *Pride and Prejudice* is this secular idea that you and I

both hold so close to our hearts, which is, people can change and actually we can change each other. And human interaction is going to be the impetus for those changes. And caring about someone is going to be the impetus for that change. And therefore, loving one another is going to make us all better people. And so I want to track Darcy because I think his impact is both. I think his impact has been us believing on some level that the bigger of an asshole a man is to other people, the more it means when he's nice to you and the complicated idea that people can change and therefore you're going to hold on to them until they can change. This point of view that we can grow and change, I do think is so important, especially in this moment of industrial revolution. Right? Your class is not going to determine who you are. Your status is not going to determine who you are. And if you're a jerk at a ball, that doesn't mean that you're a jerk all the time.

Lauren: [00:24:37] I guess one thing that I wonder is if his worth is established by his jerkiness. Does Austen want us to want him because he's a jerk? Or does Austen want us to feel like this is the last guy we ever want on Earth and then to have our own desires reformed till we get to the place where we want him? And I think that there is some ambiguity in it that has always perplexed me.

Vanessa: [00:25:08] I agree. I mean, if nothing else, you know, our – our resident ridiculous character, Mrs. Bennet, if we get our cues from the fact that Austen thinks that she's ridiculous, the fact that she condemns Darcy so harshly means Austen is winking at us to not condemn him that harshly. Right? And then we're also given the narrator's point of view that Darcy is smart and a really good friend to Bingley. And even though their dispositions are different, Bingley never doubts Darcy's affection for him. So we are not just given "Darcy is a jerk", we're given "Darcy's a jerk, Mrs. Bennet's written him off, maybe think twice about it." And Bingley, who's like this beacon of goodness and this, like, golden retriever puppy, doesn't think Darcy's a jerk.

Lauren: [00:25:53] Oh, that's so funny, because what I feel reading these pages is that he's – he's a good friend to Bingley because Bingley is of a higher class, and that is somehow acceptable to him. And so part of my prejudice against his pride, so to speak, is that I feel like we are introduced to this person as this hideous class snob. I think that's part of what Lizzy finds ridiculous. And I think that this is part of what, for him to win her affection and mine, we're going to have to overcome.

Vanessa: [00:26:31] This to me speaks to, like, one of the power dynamics in these chapters, which is the power of manners, which I know, you know, is something that Austen is thinking a lot about. Right? These books are often called, you know, like comedies of manners. And – and this is a moment in which manners are a currency, that Darcy has all of these currencies – he's good looking, he's wealthy, he's, you know, tall. And his poor manners are a way in which he can't trade well. And Bingley has the advantage of him in this way. And what's interesting is that Lizzy is making similar kinds of judgments as Darcy. Right? But she has the good manners to talk about them in private. Right? With her sister in their bedroom after the ball. She is not staring at them and gossiping, you know, to Charlotte being like, sure, they're elegant, but they sure seem jerky. So it's just interesting that Darcy and Elizabeth have the same astuteness and same judgments and same judgmental nature. And yet Lizzy's manners are just much better than Darcy's. And I do think that that is about power, right? Darcy has the luxury of not having to have good manners because he's so rich and he's a man. Whereas,

Lizzy, that is all she has, are her manners in her presentation. And so her manners have to be impeccable. And so there also seems to me to be some conversation about performance that Darcy and Lizzy might have similar judgments about the world, but Lizzy has to perform better than Darcy does.

Lauren: [00:28:13] Yeah. I mean, Austen writes that the Bingley sisters' behavior at the ball is not calculated to please. Right? They don't have to please. It is their privilege not to please. Whereas that is not power agency that any of the Bennets have, or frankly, pretty much anyone else at this ball. One thing that I love about these two chapters that feels so true to me is there's so little time that's spent on the actual ball and so much time that's spent on the anticipation and the postgame. Right? The whole question of like, "Oh, is he coming for dinner? With how many people? Oh, he's gone back to London. Oh, how many people has he brought back from London? Oh, it's not that many people. It's this many people." And it's like, these are things that don't matter at all, right? But this is where the currency exists, is in this minutia of assessment and anticipation. And I think that especially when a ball like this that obviously means nothing to Darcy but is so high stakes for the Bennets, I think that you see the amount of anxiety and energy and anticipation that gets built up and spent in the lead up to this. And oh my God, coming back from it, the need to explain every single dance and every single order to Mr. Bennet and then the need to really assess in particular what every element of this means...when you think about the stakes of this, when you think about the actual survival, the actual possible courtships of what it means to the Bennets, considering the reality of their lives, it underscores it in a way that I find very poignant and in thinking about the ridiculousness, I mean, it's totally absurd that we get all of these details in advance, especially about a dinner that isn't happening, people who aren't going to be there, and yet when this is all the power that you have is in the discussion, the anticipation, trying to get any bit of information that you have, this is what you've got. And I feel that in a very acute and sad way when it comes to Mrs. Bennet in particular. But honestly, all of the Bennets.

Vanessa: [00:30:33] I couldn't agree more. She is amazing at data collection. Right? And like statistical analysis? She's like, "Oh, no more women than men are coming. That's going to worsen the odds for my daughters. Oh, wait. One of the women who's coming is already married. Okay, that neutralizes that woman," right? And when it's women doing these things, it's gossip. And when it's men doing these things, it's war, right? Who's coming? Who's on our side? Who's on the opposition? What resources do they have? What intel do I need? And then this debrief backwards of like, he danced twice with Jane. And this is exactly why when people say these books are small and they take was entirely in drying rooms and they're books about manners, not about war and not about, you know, politics, I think what you see is that we are maybe making creatures and that Mrs. Bennet and the women in this house are just as capable as the greatest war general to, like, look at the facts on the ground and analyze and make decisions based on the analysis. It's just that this is their whole world. They have been pegged into this world and the roads aren't good enough for their world to be much bigger than this.

Lauren: [00:31:46] And I think you've really hit on a question about privilege and anxiety, that I think that the anxiety of people who have power in society, we treat as something that has high stakes attached to it. Whereas, and I think that there's a real gender reading of this, of course, but there's also one that tracks along class when we feel the anxieties often of women, and often, most often I think of women of lower classes, it all feels like something

that is entirely inconsequential. And so it's really easy for Mr. Bennet to not have anxieties about this ball because he's taken care of for the rest of his life. He can just sip his whiskey and lose himself in a book. He has chosen not to care enough about what happens to his daughters. You know, Darcy doesn't have to have any anxiety at this ball at all. He doesn't even have to worry if he's perceived as being likable or having good manners because he needs nothing from it, so he can be entirely anxiety-free. But when it comes to these girls and when it comes to Mrs. Bennet, they know that their survival depends upon these things that seem so minimized in society. The lace on a bonnet, as you've mentioned, who shows up when and who dances with whom. And I think that we have traditionally so seen those things as what doesn't matter in the world. And I find that some of my own resistance to Austen and the sort of circumscribed drawing room women's literature of the Victorian age is something that I feel I've been acculturated to resist. I feel like I have been acculturated to not see the stakes in this, and I think that Austen plays with that and that there's something incredibly knowing in how she shapes all of this. You can read this book in many different ways. You can read these chapters thinking about how absurd Mrs. Bennet is and how little one might care about what takes place in these chapters until you have the grounding in those stakes. And I think that part of what this book does so effectively is, in the end, it challenges us to question our own prejudices. And I certainly come into these early chapters with plenty of my own, and I think we're going to feel me get quite exposed as we keep talking about it.

Vanessa: [00:34:22] I mean, patriarchy has trained us all in that, right? So next week we are going to be reading chapters five and six. We will be going to the Lucas's and Jane will start becoming friends with Bingley's sisters so the social world is going to keep expanding. Lauren, is there anything in particular you're excited for?

Lauren: [00:34:43] Ugh, the Bingley sisters. You will find that I don't have a lot nice to say about the Bingley sisters, and I am looking forward to being as freely catty about them as I am permitted to be.

Vanessa: [00:34:56] Oh, they give a wide berth for that, I think, the Bingley sisters.

[Soft fluttery music plays and then fades out.]

Lauren: So obviously the most important thing that happened in today's episode in chapters is Darcy and Elizabeth meeting. And Lauren and I felt like this is the meet-cute that launched a thousand meet-cutes. And so we wanted to talk to an expert on the cultural impact of this moment and just a great thinker on romance in general and *Pride and Prejudice* specifically. And so I am going to give Margaret H. Willison a call. Margaret, for those of you who are deprived and don't now, is a cultural critic. She is a podcaster and is one third of the podcast *Appointment TV*. She is often the fourth chair on *Pop Culture Happy Hour*. She's one half of the Two Bossy Dames newsletter and is just like a brilliant person about town. So I'm going to give her a call.

[Skype dialing sounds are heard before they cut out.]

Vanessa: [00:36:15] Hi, Margaret.

Margaret: Hi, Vanessa.

Vanessa: Okay, so Margaret, Darcy and Elizabeth meet?

Margaret: Yeah.

Vanessa: He insults her.

Margaret: Mmm-hmm.

Vanessa: We call it a meet-cute. But it's not cute, it's mean. [Margaret laughs.] So just, like, what do you make of this scene in and of itself?

Margaret: [00:36:32] So some of the things that I think are really great about this scene is that as a reader, I came to it just young enough that I don't think I knew that necessarily, like, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth were, like, the big story here. So you meet him and you're like, "Wow, this guy sucks." And it is very sincere. And you aren't thinking like, "How is he going to come back from this one?" Like, "How is he going to redeem himself?" You're just like, "This guy blows." [Vanessa says, "Yeah."] And I think that it is really kind of brave to be starting with somebody that much on the back foot. [Vanessa says, "Yeah."] And then, too, to have it be on these, like, petty terms that on the one hand, you could be like, "Well, why am I supposed to care if someone gets slighted at a country dance?" Right. But on the other hand, it's like, "I'm supposed to care when someone gets letdown at a country dance because, like, that's what happens to me every day." It's like, sure, it wasn't a country dance. It was, like, a middle school dance. But I got slighted left and I got slighted right. And this bravery in saying, like, "Actually, the day-to-day lives of these, like, bog-standard middle class people in this town of absolutely no renown are worth your attention. And I know you agree because you're watching your neighbors all the time. I can tell. You can tell, and none of us should pretend otherwise." And I respect that boldness.

Vanessa: [00:38:02] Yeah, it is. Austen is a confrontational writer in a lot of ways. Right? I dare you to find this boring because it's not. So, Margaret, I love an enemies-to-lovers romance. It was programmed within me. And sometimes I really struggle to justify it. Right? I'm like, "We shouldn't be training people to think that people they hate are actually great. We should train them to trust their guts."

Margaret: [00:38:27] Yes. In some ways, it aligns, like, way too closely with my addiction to that reassessing second glance. Right? Where, like, somebody initially sees me, and it's like, I'm like this cute, very highly femme person with a really high voice who likes girly things very publicly and unapologetically. And it's like, "I think Carly Rae Jepsen is amazing." And they're like, "Oh, airhead." And for the longest time, my joy was being, like, because I think that she represents like a potent antidote to the repressive emotional mores of our society and having them be like [Margaret makes rewind sound] and just like, rewind the tape and be like, "Who's that?" And like, why did I like that second reassessing glance? Because it gave me this opportunity to define myself and to see someone else recognize who I was. And I've gotten to a place, I've gotten to a place of maturity now where in real life, I don't need someone to think I'm dumb to begin with to register them realizing I'm smart and have really worthwhile things to say about the stuff I think is important. But I think for so many of us, that challenge is where self-definition happens. That antagonism is what prompts us to impress people. There

may be human beings in the world whose motivation isn't exclusively relational, and they're the ones who say things like, you know, the most important promises are the ones you keep to yourself. And like, that's true. But also every class in college I needed a crush and a nemesis, and the crush was so I would come to class with my hair washed and the nemesis was so I would do my homework. Right? Because without external factors to define myself against, without those relational drives, my ambition is lacking. So those are your models, your crush and your nemesis. Right? And I think the beauty of the enemies-to-lovers plot is that in its perfect form, it gives you both. In its perfect form, you have that antagonistic space for spirited self-definition, and then you step into a space where either just your protagonist or ideally as in *Pride and Prejudice*, both characters are shifted into being supportive people who recognize the best qualities in one another, and instead of being a foil you're pushing back against to demonstrate your worth, they become a mirror that you're looking in to see how you're progressing and to see the you you'd like to become and know that you have someone who believes you can get there.

Vanessa: [00:41:03] I love that, the idea of the crush and the nemesis in one person and, like, the external processing of that, right, that what they're doing is not determining who one another are alone, but it's also figuring out and creating a sense of self in conversation with each other. And I think that happens more and more throughout the book, you know? So what do you think the impact of this meet-cute is, this meet-mean is?

Margaret: [00:41:32] [Laughs.] Well, I think one of the things that it does so well for love stories is really understand it and especially ones set in historical times. But I think the greater degree to which a modern book can embody it, the better it is, which is that in the 19th century, marriage was women's – one of their only spaces for self-definition, like you told the world who you were based on who you married, and if you didn't marry, you were no one. [Laughs.] And so the enemies lovers plot, because it gives you that space for the antagonistic self-definition. It enshrines the way that your romantic choice can be your character defining, like, battle, basically, which is sort of where romance as a genre, like, lives. Two people liking each other and getting married happily as they grow in affection towards one another? Like, Austen does her best with those plots. You can look at *Northanger Abbey* where it's just like, you know, Henry Tilney just, like, sees this cute girl who definitely has a crush on him and she's, like, maybe she's cute, too. And then you've just got to have all this gothic nonsense thrown in to create any kind of drama or tension. What enemies-to-lovers does is it brings that battle and that conflict into the characters themselves and so done right, it's both just, like, incredibly addicting. And it's giving you this very vivid experience of who the characters are.

Vanessa: [00:43:02] So it's 220 years later. Are you glad that this is the book that launched a thousand romance novels? Are you –

Margaret: [00:43:12] Yes and no. So, yes, in some ways because it's a foundational text for me and I think it has this incredibly elegant structure and this incredibly nuanced happy ending, this–this–this version of best relationship that's so brave in its subtlety. So when I find books that are really honoring that, I'm like, "Fuck, yeah." However, on the flip side, I think there are a lot of people who sort of boil it down to some of its thrilling elements, but in a way that rob it of it's like full dynamic potential where they're like, "Well, what's great about this book is that this extremely handsome, extremely rich man capitulates to you completely." As much as I

love *Bridget Jones's Diary*, particularly the movie version, like I think it is a delightful film...as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, it lacks for me because of the line that so many people love most, which is, you know, "I like you just the way you are." On one hand, obviously, like what a beautiful message. And especially like what a beautiful message in a misogynistic society that tells women your life is the opposite of eating a Reese's. Like, there's no right way to do it right. You're always going to be wrong somehow. However, I think that the beauty is not just someone who will capitulate to your understanding. Lizzy needs to change. And that's why I think *Pride and Prejudice* is as strong as it is. Not merely because of Darcy's capitulation, but because of the beauty of how a mutual capitulation is nothing of the kind. How a mutual capitulation is actually this augmentation of the two people and this maximization of everything they have the potential to be.

Vanessa: [00:45:07] Well, Margaret, thank you so much for talking to me about this. I could talk to you about Austen forever. Lucky for me, I get to spend any amount of time in my life doing that.

Margaret: [00:45:18] Yeah. Look, anytime you want to have me come on here and give my opinions, you'll find I speak quite freely for one so young. [Both laugh.] Thank you very much for having me, Vanessa. It's always a wonderful treat.

[Synth music plays.]

Vanessa: [00:45:34] You've been listening to 'Live From Pemberley'. We are a small show, so we need your support to run. If you can please consider supporting us on Patreon at patreon.com/hotandbotheredrompod. You get a bonus little conversation with Lauren and I for every episode. Not to brag. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. We are A Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is the wonderful and beautiful and brilliant Ariana Nedelman. We are distributed by A Cast and we of course have the honor of thanking the gentry of our Patreon, our Jane level patrons, Viscountess Elise Kanagaratnam of Unicornia, Baroness Gretchen Sneegast of Breakfastcarbston, Knight Molly Reel of Worcestershire Sauce, the Countess of Kristen Hall, Dame Leah B of Pickleshire, Duchess to Cats of Filofaxia, Dame Becky Boo of Tiaralandia, and Duchess Bidy Higgins of Bubble Bath. Thank you so much for making the show possible. Thanks also to Margaret H. Wilson, Miriam Burstein, Ayesha Ramachandran, and Elsie Michie for talking to us. Of course, also thank you to Lara Glass, Gaby Iori, AJ Erasmus, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan and Stephanie Paulsell, all of our patrons and Dame Lauren Sandler of Brooklandia.

Lauren: [00:46:59] And to you, my dear.

Vanessa: [00:47:01] Oh, thank you. Indubitably.

[Music fades out.]