

Not Sorry Works

Live from Pemberley

A Private Audience, Chapters 19 & 20

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Vanessa Zoltan [00:00:00] [Light background music begins] He gives her good reasons for wanting to marry in general and her specifically, but it's not really a question. Without taking more than a breath, he lists the reasons he's asking, Lady Catherine being reasons number one through 17, and then starts talking as if Lizzy has said yes, even though she hasn't. In fact, she says a very firm no, which is when Mr. Collins's proposal goes from being funny to something else.

People joke that there are components of Austen's novels that are nearly horror. Austen courted this idea, too. Her first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is a gothic novel that compares being trapped into marriage with being haunted in an old house. Austen's novels never have supernatural elements, but she definitely plays with genre. And this proposal scene between Collins and Lizzy, to me at least, is *the* horror scene of *Pride and Prejudice*. Imagine a man who could control your life and the louder you yell no, the more sure he is that you mean yes. That is on one level what's happening in this chapter. Here is Professor Claudia Johnson.
[Background music fades out]

Claudia Johnson [00:01:24] I have this theory about, about Jane Austen that... that she really likes smart people. She likes people. Who can see themselves, you know, and only the people who can *see* themselves can change. Only the people who *see* themselves, who can also feel pain. I mean - what makes Mr. Collins such a fabulous character? He's absolutely inhumiliable. He cannot see how absurd he is. He can't - I don't even think he can see that he's actually kind of violent. You know, you don't have to push too far to think about what not hearing "no" means.

Vanessa [00:02:08] The chapter ends with Collins still thinking that Lizzy is essentially saying yes to the proposal. He lists all the reasons the match would be advantageous for Lizzy and dismisses any refusal as illogical. Lizzy thinks to herself that she has to go get her father. Maybe Collins will believe a "no" if it comes from a man. Chapter 20 starts with Mrs. Bennett approaching Collins to congratulate him on the happy engagement. Collins is like, "Thanks! She didn't technically say yes, but she's just being ladylike, so no worries." Mrs. Bennett smells bullshit. She knows Lizzy is going to ruin this whole thing, but she tries to assuage Collins in his confusion. Here's Professor Ayesha Ramachandran on why Collins might have a right to be as confused as he is.

Ayesha Ramachandran [00:03:03] I think he cannot understand that she would balk financial security in securing her family because she doesn't like him or doesn't like the way he proposed, right. That's the first thing. And the second, which I think is where we really do fault him, is he seems to not understand that there are ways in which he's not desirable. Right? Like for him, patriarchy is about financial security and women have to fall in line within that patriarchy. That there's no room for female agency or desire. And I think *that's* where as contemporary readers, we find that to be just unacceptable. But I think from the standards of

the period, and certainly from his perspective, there really is a cognitive dissonance about, you know, how could you possibly choose otherwise? I think the fact that Charlotte, who is Lizzy's friend, *does* actually choose this suggests just what that gap of - and this, just how radical Lizzy's refusal is.

Vanessa [00:03:53] Charlotte and Mrs. Bennett may be of one mind, but this is one of the few moments in the book that I love Mr. Bennett. Once Mrs. Bennet hears of Lizzy's refusal, she immediately appeals to Mr. Bennett and his power in the household. She begs him to force Lizzy to marry Collins. And Lizzy is summoned to face his judgment. But instead of condemning her to a loveless marriage, Mr. Bennett backs up Lizzy. He famously says, "From this day on, you will be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never talk to you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never speak to you again if you do."

The house is aflutter with the proposal and rejection. Mrs. Bennet is campaigning every family member, hoping to build support for her cause. Charlotte Lucas comes over and Mrs. Bennet begs Charlotte to convince Lizzy to marry Collins. Charlotte knows she cannot. The chapter ends with Mr. Collins finally withdrawing his proposal. He hasn't accepted Lizzy's no, but he has realized that he didn't want her anyway. [Intro music fades in] I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Lauren Sandler [00:05:11] And I'm Lauren Sandler.

Vanessa [00:05:13] And this is Live from Pemberley from Hot and Bothered. [Intro music fades out]

Lauren. Collins. Whew. [affirmation; laughter] Collins. Feelings. What do you have to help us with some of the context for this today?

Lauren [00:05:41] Well, for a moment, let's talk about marriage. And let's talk about a feeling that I think a lot of readers bring in to this material, that this is how it always was: that parents arranged things and parents decided what was good for their daughters, and that marriages were simply financial arrangements from the beginning of capital all the way through at least the Victorian era. In fact, that era was a real backlash and a backlash to centuries. And Austen is writing in this really interesting moment. She's writing coming out of a century of libertinism and coming into a century of really repressive more.

Let's go back a little bit. From the 12th century until 1753, right, just a few decades before she sits down to write this - for those 600 years, there was something called spousals, which meant that a man and a woman who loved each other [laughs], ostensibly, could say that to each other in the present tense and therefore be wedded. And the reason that spousals existed was so that lovers could marry without their parents scheming, without the notion of financial control being part of a wedding. So there was literally a legal stopgap that could permit people marrying for love or desire, even if it was shunned within their family or their community.

And then what happens in the 1600s is restoration, right. So Charles is brought out of exile. Monarchy is reestablished. It ends Cromwell's commonwealth period. And it really quickly changes the moral climate and sort of a release. So you have the royal court once again and a royal court that is just ecstatic in being reestablished. And part of that ecstasy gets expressed

physically and emotionally. So adultery becomes all the rage in London society [laughs]. I mean, that sort of like bawdiness that we think of sometimes when we think of England - this is it, baby. Like, this is the turkey leg and someone with their crinoline pulled up. The happenings are happening.

And so we have a hundred years of such behavior. And then George III claims the crown and is so worried about the morality of his country that one of his first acts, I believe, is to issue a proclamation on the suppression of vice and immorality. The rise of evangelical Christianity follows a prolonged war with France, the growing power of conservative middle classes, and in this climate, Austen starts writing, right? She starts writing this book as *First Impressions* in the late 1790s. She publishes it in 1813, and in 1830 Victoria takes the crown and this era that we think of, I think so often when we think of British culture, and especially the writing of British women, who are chafing at the morals of a country and a country that puts women in these bird cages, that arranges these marriages, that we've seen and discussed through years of studying British literature - this is what begins.

And so I think it's really important that we understand Collins's proposal and also Lizzy's refusal in the context of the 100 years that led before it. That Lizzy, I think, feels in her bones that she's not going to be part of this backlash. And Collins feels in his bones that this is essentially what the king is demanding and that it is his birthright as a middle class man, as a man with a parish, to demand his own happiness and Lizzy's rightful hand. And here we are.

Vanessa [00:09:45] Part of what I was thinking about, Lauren, as you were talking, was that almost all Regency romance novels take place - I mean, Regency right means this, right? Like this Georgian period. And it's so interesting that it makes her such a great literary device. And I think part of that is just because *Pride and Prejudice* is so good and we're trying to replicate it, but I also think that the oppression of women in these really firm constructs means that we get to explore a lot of modern understandings of patriarchy. Right? It's not literally that you can't kiss a man without being destroyed anymore, but it *is* that you can't do certain things without revenge porn ruining your life. Right? And it's so interesting that this backlash is still something that millions of women like to read about. And I think it is because they see themselves in it. They see themselves in Lizzy.

Lauren [00:10:46] I mean, it's such a black and white portrayal of how much we continue to live with.

Vanessa: Right.

Lauren: Which, you know, isn't saying we live with it in the same way [affirmation]. But in general, we have equal pay or however we want to define financial equality societally, of course marriage is something that will have a financial element to it. And until our parents [laughs] stop thinking that they know the answer to what we should be prioritizing and what makes us happy, these are things that will also lord over us. And because those things are so inherently patriarchal, because we've been so conditioned to honestly feel like this is the way it always has been and thus the way it always will be, that lasts. And I think it's really incumbent upon us to remember it *hasn't* always been that way. And that history is such a cyclical thing instead of a straight line.

Vanessa [00:11:42] I mean, and this is part of what England is exporting as part of its empire, right? Is its culture. And so when, you know, King George offers a proclamation on vice and immorality, that becomes de rigueur in the rest of Western society as well. And yeah, right - this pressure's on women to be flirtatious but not slutty and, right - and we see that in this chapter. Collins keeps saying to Lizzy, like, "you're being such a lady," right? Like he's actually putting a premium on the fact that she doesn't want to marry as a sign of her virtue. It's like "well, she wants to hang on to her virginity and her virtues, so she's performing this purity" and he's like, "yes, yes, I know that this is a performance you have to go through." Like, the fact that he can justify her refusals like that shows us the pressures on women, right? That some women would feel as though they had to do that. Even though I do love that Lizzy is like, "if such women exist, I don't necessarily know that these women who refuse men for the sake of propriety actually exist."

Lauren [00:13:00] I love that you brought up the notion of culture as export in this moment, because, you know, simultaneously what's happening - and it's not part of what Austen is engaging with, but internationally - is the slave trade. And I think that the need for Britain to make a moral stand in some way that it can police by policing women is a way of justifying morally its actions around the world. Right? If we have a proclamation on the suppression of immorality, we certainly cannot be immoral enough to do something that is wrong. Therefore, slavery must be correct because *we* are correct [affirmation], and we can show you that by how we behave at home. And here's the literature that will now be published throughout the world, the Anglophone world, in translation, you name it, of how people are behaving. And clearly that is all Collins knows is the literature. He doesn't know any real women. And so to him, when Lizzy refuses him, it's charming. He calls it *charming*, because that's how he has been taught to see how people respond if they're moral.

Vanessa [00:14:12] And I think that we now think of Austen as conservative and as part of this judgment of morality, when really she's giving us a heroine who's like: "not only no, but I call bullshit on this whole premise. You're saying that women would play with you like this? I do not make it a sport to mess with decent men. You are saying that this only can be a financial arrangement. I'm saying no." Right? Like this is absolutely Austen being a feminist and rejecting this really patriarchal notion that she is nearly in the water.

Lauren [00:14:52] In fact, Lizzy, in one of my favorite lines of this reading, says to Collins, "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but a rational creature," which is a real wink to Wollstonecraft, who opens up *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appealing to the rational creatures, the women who will be reading. And it's such a great moment to say: I'm drawing a line. I'm a Wollstonecraft reader. I am not a reader of the conduct literature that tells you that no means yes.

Vanessa [00:15:28] In Collins's defense, he thinks that she's acting irrationally. Right? And that is the part of his little speech... I find, if not convincing, like, fair enough. He's like, "Look, I'm proposing to you because your dad's going to die, hopefully not for a while, and, like - I want you to be able to keep the house [laughs]," right? Like, this makes sense. And also, you're not necessarily going to get a lot of other offers. You're poor and you don't have much of a dowry. And yes, you're very pretty, but like - not a lot of men are going to go for that. Which is like, fair enough. And then what's so funny to me, though, is that he - he's saying, "I can't treat you like a rational creature. You're being irrational. The only rational thing is to marry me." But

then he still feels like he has to perform this, like, "And from the first moment I saw you, I knew. And I love you. You're so pretty." And I'm just like: well, if you're making the rational argument, then why are you performing this love?

Lauren [00:16:30] It's so interesting how in a loveless marriage, there still needs to be the performance of attraction and adulation; that there's this element of not knowing what to do with how we are expected to desire and want to be flattered and want to be attracted in that way. It just - it needs to be put in the right place, right? It needs to be window dressing over the documents [laughs], over the leases and deeds and dowries. And I think that that, too, is the sort of notion that, "oh, girls want to be pretty, girls want to be flattered, girls want to be adored. And we, the rational creatures, know that the only thing that matters is whether we have an appropriate wife and whether we get to manage the finances in an appropriate way." And I think that, again, it's the notion that women are fundamentally irrational creatures and men are fundamentally rational creatures, that he's coming back to that.

Vanessa [00:17:31] Right. And Lizzy is saying, "no, I'm rational, too, and rational people can disagree." And the subtext is that she can't stand him. But she says a version of that - she's like, "I could not make you happy. Like, we would be bad for each other. We would be *miserable*." And he just, like - that is not part of his equation. And yet he's performing that it is part of his equation. So he's doing this doublespeak, where she's actually doing this very direct responses to him. Right? Like she is doing clarity as kindness, and God bless her, she doesn't go "because you're ridiculous!" Right? "You're like you are insufferable. I could never marry someone insufferable." She's just like, "we cannot make each other happy. That is it."

Lauren [00:18:18] The notion of happiness through these pages is really interesting, too, because he refers to happiness frequently and it's always with the word "my" in front of it. He never says "your happiness," he never says "our happiness." It's the thing that is perhaps most odious about him to me, through the whole proposal, is how hellbent he is on securing his own happiness and how entitled he is to saying to the woman that he's proposing to, "I have selected you because I think *you* will make *me* happy." Never "I can make you happy. It is rational for you to marry me and it is rational for me to marry you because you will make me happy." [Affirmation]

And no matter how much sympathy we can call up for Collins, because he's someone who, because of the mores of the day, has been sequestered from spending time with women, also because I think he values women so little that why would he ever spend time with them? He has no idea how to talk to an actual female. But the thing that I *can't* conjure sympathy for is the *absolute* focus on his own happiness. And that being perfectly appropriate to trot out as his reason for marrying her over and over and over. Like - not having the self-awareness, the wherewithal to think that maybe her happiness matters, too. Cause her happiness simply to come in the package of him and the house and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. What else could anyone want for, if being offered all of that?

Vanessa [00:19:50] I think that might sort of schtick on Collins at this point is that the only thing he knows how to respect is power. And so Lady Catherine de Bourgh told him to find a wife, and this is the one that makes sense, and so he's going to find a wife. And Mr. Darcy is powerful, and so he's going to be obsequious to Mr. Darcy. And we know, right, like - when he was at university, no one was telling him what to do, so we get the impression that he kind of

did nothing. And it sounds like he didn't really stand up to his dad until his dad died. And then he was like, "Who's the highest patriarch in my life now? It's Mr. Bennett. I will go for Mr. Bennett." Right? Like - he's just someone who's always looking for a strong person in charge. And he was told to get married and, and he uses that to Lizzy, right? He's like, Lady Catherine de Bourgh told us to get married and so we get married, because someone with power told us that. And Lizzy's just like, "I don't recognize her power. Like, I don't know this lady."

Lauren [00:20:52] One thing that's interesting to me is since Austen writes this scene in direct dialogue [affirmation], you know, we don't have the inner workings of either of their minds [affirmation] through it. And so it's a scene that almost like a script you could direct in different ways. You could play a bumbling Collins, or you could play a conniving Collins, or you could play an aggressive Collins. And I think that it would hold up with all of these different readings -

Vanessa: Totally.

Lauren: - which is sort of an interesting choice, because I feel like Austen's leaving the door open for us to read him however we see fit in a moment, to apply this, this mode on to so many different types of men [affirmation]. You know, if you're in the mood to see him as sort of bumbling and not really knowing what's going on or what to do, you could read it that way. We've certainly seen film adaptations that treat him that way. Or if you really want to do it villainous, like - if this is going to be someone who is just smarmy and on her and there's no no means no to him because, who knows, maybe he's turned on by that, that is genuinely charming to him. You can play it that way. She's leaving it open to us to project this dialogue onto different tropes of bad men and different notions of badness. And I think that's really fascinating.

Vanessa [00:22:16] I mean, and that's my experience in being in a room with a man who I find his behavior badly, right? It's this confusion of: I don't know what's actually going on. Like, are you being sinister? Have you just observed patriarchy? Like, are you just bumbling? Like - what is actually going on here? Like, Lizzy might not know what's going on, but what she does know is going on is he's saying, and this is the sentence that we're, we wanted to look closely at, he is saying, "you would have been less amiable in my eyes had there not been this little unwillingness." Right? Which is just like - that can absolutely, to your point, like be a guy who's like a little bit into to feeling a little rapey. And whether it's this like: "you would be less amiable in my eyes if you did not behave in this Georgian way of feigning a little unwillingness," or if it is this sinister, like, "Hey, this turns me on" - we don't know. But the words I find, I mean, as I said in my opening essay, I find this *horrifying*.

Lauren [00:23:23] And it's also interesting coming out of this restoration era, too, where kink was a really big part of life, right? So the notion of sort of play acting and eroticism was really a part of pop culture in society. And so coming out of that, you could maybe see that there could be a Collins who perhaps has found someone who wants to be chased around the table a little bit [affirmation]. And I want to leave the door open for people getting a mutual thing that they want together, especially coming out of an era where that was something that people were publicly interested in - now it's not like those interests disappear. People are just either privately interested in things or repressing them. You know, this is where a lot of our English repression comes from, is the backlash against the restoration into the Georgian and

then Victorian era. Or you could see it as just like, "No, this is my entitlement, and the fact that I want it and you don't actually is what turns me on, because the fact that you have to give it to me is something that confers power on me." And the fact that for Lizzy it is such a turn off is something that I think he's having his own confused, complicated response to, in a way that we know is really not okay. And with Collins, you just get the feeling that he has no idea how to feel a mutual desire with anyone.

Vanessa [00:24:57] I mean in the horror is even, right - like Lizzy starts sort of screaming before Collins even proposes, right? She says, "Dear madam, do not go. I beg you will not go. Mr. Collins must excuse me. He can have nothing to say to me that anybody need not hear. I'm going away myself." Right? Like Lizzy is like on the run. She's like, "Please God, don't let him even propose to me". I just feel her suffocation in this moment, and it - it breaks my heart.

Lauren [00:25:26] I also find it interesting that Lizzy talks more and more and more as the proposal happens. Right? So it begins with Collins saying so much and her trying to refuse him as respectfully and quietly as possible as the custom of a woman would suggest in this era. And gradually that becomes more and more unbearable. And she needs to say more and more. And it's very, very clear that what *he* wants from Lizzy is her silence in the face of power. He even talks about how why he knows that Lady de Bourgh is going to accept her as his appropriate mate is that he knows that in spite of Lizzy's verbosity, in the presence of Lady Catherine, her verbosity will be, as Collins says, "tempered with the silence and respect that Lady Catherine's rank will inevitably excite." This notion that, you know, for him, an appropriate wife is a silent wife and a silent wife who understands the importance of power.

He also then, you know, continues on to talk about the *violence* of his affection for her, which clearly he doesn't even know what that means. He doesn't have any real affection for. It's hard to imagine - although, again, this is something that could be played differently, depending on how you direct the scene. But this notion of sort of silence and violence, of being, needing to perform your femininity as someone who doesn't speak and him needing to perform his ardent masculinity as someone who feels violently affectionate towards her. All of this speaks to the sort of expectation of what a satisfying marriage looks like in terms of gender. And it could not be more opposite to what seems organic to Lizzy, or I imagine pretty much anyone.

Vanessa [00:27:28] Yeah. Poor Lizzy is trying to do this as kindly as possible and what, like, within the social mores is possible. And he actually isn't letting her. She's like, "Fine! You want me to yell, I'll yell. I'll do whatever I have to do to get out of this."

Lauren, I learned of a story from the sort of lay historian Dana Schwartz about Anne of Cleves, who married Henry the VIII in 1540. You know, he had her shipped over from Germany to marry her. And the way that they met in person - like they already were betrothed - was that he had several of his men in waiting, whatever they were called [laughs], dress up in capes and masks. And he, like, play acted attacking her so that he could rescue her, and assumed that she would know that this was a tradition. And she was horrified. She was like, "this group of men have come to rape me, and I will not be a virgin to marry the King of England." And he was deeply hurt by this. And essentially the marriage was over before it started because she didn't play act correctly. And like - that is how English this is, right? Like, mind you, this is like 250 years before Jane Austen is writing, but Henry the VIII was doing this in conversation with, like, mythology around King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, that there is this, you

know, idea of chivalry and he was going to save her. Right? Like he was going to be chivalrous. And so England just has this history of constantly being in conversation with its own myths in such a destructive and strange way. And I love the idea that this German woman who's from, like, fairly nearby in the same class and everything, she's like, "What the hell, this is so weird." And we see this, you know, hundreds of years, of years later with Collins and Lizzy.

Lauren [00:29:19] And you can draw this line, as you were saying before, all the way through history to right now. Right? These are just extreme manifestations of the weirdness that women are supposed to dress up for and perform. I mean, as you're describing that story, my mind just flashed to the Spice Girls where it's like, "okay, there are five different types of women. We're going to dress up like drag queens and perform them for you. Which one's going to be your favorite?"

Vanessa: Right.

Lauren: It's like another kind of shape shifting of all of this. And on the one hand, do I want Ginger Spice's dress and platforms and hair? I absolutely do. Do I feel like I want it for myself? Totally. Do I necessarily need to be painted and constructed and purse my lips in the same way? No, that's starting to feel really weird. Am I doing it for a man? Am I doing it for me? Like this is the whole mindfuck of femininity and performance and pleasure and dressing. And how do we get from here to the Kardashians? How do we get from here to nose contouring? How do we get from here to thongs and fake boobs? And how do we get from here to like a form of pro-sex feminism that says however you want it is okay? It is fucking complicated [affirmation]. But, but to Lizzy, it's not. And that, I think, is part of the real liberation in this book, is Lizzy's ability to be like, "No, I know who I am. I may not know what I want. But I know that I don't want this, and I know I'm not messing around with you."

Vanessa: Yeah.

Lauren: And I do love that Mrs. Bennett, when Collins goes to her and says, "Great news, Lizzy refused me, which means she must want me." She's like: Oh, no, no, no. [Laughs] Like, there's no "maybe she wants you." It's "no, this is my girl. And if she's saying no, it means no. I'm appalled. It's not what I want. But we have to take it at face value because this is who she is."

Vanessa [00:31:21] I mean, she hates it and tries to convince Lizzy to say yes -so much so that she's like, "Jane, convince your sister!" And again, God bless Jane, stronger than I think I previously thought, Jane is like, "No, I'm absolutely not going to try to convince Lizzy of that." She does it as politely as possible, but she does not try to convince Lizzy. And then Charlotte Lucas comes over and Mrs. Bennet is like, "Oh my God, please try to convince her!" Right? Like, she's - she is pressing her point, so much so that she, she says this threat, like, "I will never speak to you again if you don't marry him." Which I- just is like the most awful thing a mother can say, or in the top, you know, percent of it. And also, I feel for her: this was her chance to potentially stay in her house. And her daughter isn't doing what she can to protect her and her sisters. And so, like, I understand her frustration. And also I just feel gutted for Lizzy and for Mrs. Bennet herself. Like, it's so degrading to say, "I will never speak to you again unless you do this."

Lauren [00:32:26] And there, too, I think is a question of power, because what else does she have to threaten her daughter with? She has nothing except her own presence as a mother, and that's all she can threaten to take away from her daughter. And she is aware that Lizzy's desire to feel romantic love in her life is something that will literally land the whole family homeless. So the stakes are high, and Mrs. Bennett's agency within it is like nil. And so, yeah, it's awful and it's traumatic, but also Mrs. Bennett's a very activated person and when people are very activated, they reach for whatever they can. And you can see why this would be the moment that she would reach for that.

Vanessa [00:33:18] Yeah. I mean, what's so interesting is that Mrs. Bennett and Lizzy both are like, "Do you know what's going to put an end to this? Talking to Mr. Bennett." Lizzy is like "Frickin hell, Collins - maybe you'll believe my father." And Mrs. Bennett is like, "Okay, if my husband tells Lizzy that she has to, Lizzy will listen." So they go to Mr. Bennett and, you know, say, "Make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins." And Lizzy is essentially like, "please frickin don't make me marry Mr. Collins." Mr. Bennett says this line, right, of like, "you're going to be estranged from one of us because I essentially forbid you from marrying him." Which is lovely and complicated, right? Because he's putting himself in direct opposition to his wife. He could say this differently. He could be like, "my love - no. Like, she can't marry him. I respect you and where you're coming from, but, like, we cannot ask our daughter to sacrifice herself like this." Instead, he's like: choose which of your parents.

Lauren [00:34:23] Though I feel like Austen writes it as such an applause line.

Vanessa [00:34:27] Yeah, totally

Lauren [00:34:27] Likely really to get the biggest rise out of us. The biggest like woot woot out of us. And it is incredibly satisfying for that affirmation]. But it certainly make you wonder: why does he not say, "Dear Mr. Collins - perhaps you would find greater happiness with our daughter Mary. You and she seem like you have so much in common," like - why, I don't understand why it is just D.O.A.. the notion that Collins would marry a daughter. There are at least three other daughters to choose from, and one does seem to be potentially a very good match for him.

Vanessa [00:35:01] Well, I also think it's Collins's humiliation. Collins does move on very quickly to Charlotte, but just to, like, go down the line, I can - he's got a little pride.

Lauren [00:35:12] Oh, he has a lot of pride.

Vanessa [00:35:14] And so I can imagine them being like, "well, we have the third daughter- we said no to the first and you tried for the second, and now there's the third," at some point being like, "She's just going to reject me too." And Charlotte is like making her moves, right? Charlotte arrives at the end of Chapter 20, and, you know, Mrs. Bennett is like, "Oh, my God, Charlotte, please convince Lizzy to do this." And Charlotte is like, "No," and then, like, hangs out in the room as Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennett are having this private conversation. And we don't see it, but we feel like she moves in on Collins pretty quickly. So there isn't really a chance for Collins to move on to Mary because Charlotte has like got her marks on him.

Can we talk about how much Lydia *loves* the drama? [Laughs] She's like, "Charlotte, guess what? So much gossip." [Laughs]

Lauren [00:36:09] You can just see the stack of Hello magazine piling up next to her bed.

Vanessa [00:36:17] I frickin' love it, because I agree this is a boring house a lot of the time. And finally, there's some *drama*. And what's more fun than other people's drama.

Lauren [00:36:26] And I have to say, it is sort of harmless gossip. It's not like her sister is getting forced into something that she disdains.

Vanessa [00:36:34] No.

Lauren [00:36:35] Lydia thinks that Collins is, like, the lamest dude in history. And the idea of rejecting him, I'm sure, is something she takes great pleasure in. It's not like she's feasting over someone's misery who we have a lot of sympathy for him.

Vanessa [00:36:51] And Collins isn't miserable! He's embarrassed.

Lauren [00:36:54] Right. The only thing that's been hurt is his pride. And we all know, because Austen has told us in the title and many other times, that is a theme in the book. [Laughs]

Vanessa [00:37:05] Well, Lauren, we're going to see Mr. Collins bounce back.

Lauren [00:37:08] We are. We are. And we're going to get to talk about Charlotte. We love talking about Charlotte. And this is a big chapter to really feel and think a lot about Charlotte and also about Charlotte's friendship with Lizzy. So I'm very excited to do that with you in our next episode.

Vanessa [00:37:24] And in two weeks we're actually going to be reading three chapters: 21, 22, and 23. We'll be finishing Volume I. We're going to watch Jane get her heart a little broken. A lot is going to happen. And I am excited to talk to you about it as always, Lauren.

[Transition music]

Lauren [00:37:59] So we were thinking about Lizzy's refusal and wondering if it was a radical act. Right? What does this mean for a young woman to speak and act on behalf of her own happiness? Not just accept this man who's shown up speaking of *his* own happiness. And we wanted to talk to someone about it who has published widely on Victorian familial and marital norms, but also understands the prior era. Talia Shaffer is someone who's written a shelf of books related to women in the 19th century, including *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, which just happened to have won the Best Book Prize from the North American Victorian Studies Association. And she is professor of English at CUNY at both Queens College and the Graduate Center. Let's get her on the phone. [Phone ringing]

Lauren [00:38:57] Hi, Talia.

Talia Shaffer [00:38:59] Hi, Lauren. It's nice to hear from you.

Lauren [00:39:02] Okay. So, Mr. Collins, is perhaps to many of us, like, the embodiment of what one might think of as romance's rival? [laughs] And yet, I suspect that you might think that he's not such a bad catch.

Talia [00:39:17] Well, I personally think he's a bad catch, but that's because I'm a modern person. And if I were living in the 1790s, he would be the obvious person to marry. And his inability to understand that Lizzy has rejected him comes from that. He itemizes all the reasons. He's the one that is set up as the right match for Elizabeth and her mother believes it, he believes it. What's bizarre is Elizabeth's certainty that he isn't. That's what's completely out of character and looks ahead to a new century where romantic decisions are going to be taken in a very different way.

Lauren [00:39:51] So in the context of Austen's writing and also Austen's first generation of readership, would a reader have thought like: "Oh, yeah, he's right to think that she couldn't possibly be refusing him! He's right to think, 'Oh, this must be some machination, some form of like performing virtue or maybe even seduction,'" that he doesn't seem like such a gaslighting jerk as many of us might think he is?

Talia [00:40:18] Well, it's a little complicated. It's a good question. For one thing, it *was* part of the culture at the turn of that centuries, 18th into 19th century, that women always said no, and that the no couldn't be believed. And so that part of it would be an ordinary assumption, not that she particularly is being seductive or flirtatious, but that she's going through the cultural script, the protocols. So he's right about that.

What's interesting about Mr. Collins is that formally, structurally speaking, he has set up as the obvious match for Lizzy. Jane is going to be taken by Bingley. She's going to marry the cousin. Whenever a cousin appears in a 19th century novel, that's always going to be your love interest for various very good reasons in terms of security, trustworthiness, class parity, etc. And the fact that he's going to inherit the family home is even more perfect because then she can stay in the home and she can kind of mentor her sisters and everything is set up for him to be her match. But what's really awful is how awful he is. And that was one of Austen's innovations, was to make this familiar suitor, which - he's the prototypical familiar suitor, but she chooses to make him absolutely insufferable. And so she gets the reader wanting Elizabeth to hold out for a more romantic suitor. And that's new.

But this shift happened within Austen's own lifetime. So in the 1790s, in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which were written in that decade, the women who fall - have passionate, romantic feelings for men like Wickham or Willoughby - it's a disaster, right? What they need to have is a kind of companionate trust and affection, a sense that their matches are going to be people they can rely on, people who are morally solid and virtuous. Romantic love, romantic passion is really untrustworthy. It can lead you into connecting yourself to really bad guys who are going to betray you and let down your family and endanger you. And so that's what's happening in the 1790s.

By the time Austen dies after the 1810s, it's kind of shifted the other way. The idea now is that familiar matches are boring, old school fuddy duddy settling. And what's really exciting is for women to follow their hearts, as it were. And so by the time you get to *Persuasion*, as, you

know, her last finished published novel, it's the opposite. The familiar suitor gets rejected, and it turns out to be a better idea to marry a romantic stranger who, you know, comes barreling in. But so when we're in the early years, in *Pride and Prejudice*, that shift hasn't happened yet. Following your heart is a bad idea. And I always say when I teach *Pride and Prejudice* that if this were written, you know, later, Lydia would be the heroine, not Lizzy, because that's what she does. She follows her heart. She throws caution to the winds. She's like a Hollywood heroine. She follows her man. She risks everything for love. And this is absolutely a horrific, appalling idea. Austen is *not* about romantic love, particularly in the early novels, really at all.

Lauren [00:43:16] So how did that massive cultural shift happen so quickly and how much does it have to do with Jane Austen?

Talia [00:43:23] Yes, such a good question. I mean, I, of course, think Austen was central to it. But one of the things that happens is *Pride and Prejudice*. And what's really cool about Darcy is that he combines the familiar and romantic elements, and there are very few characters who do that. In the 19th century, Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre becomes another one eventually. But those become the romantic icons of the century. Because, I mean, look at Darcy: he is a romantic stranger. He comes in, you know, from far away. He's tall, dark, and handsome. He's rich, possibly untrustworthy. We have indications at the beginning that he's treated Wickham badly. All of those are characteristics of the romantic lover.

But it turns out he is a really good brother. He treats servants well. You know, he wants to help the Bennet family. All of those are qualities of the familiar suitor - the trustworthy, affable, friendly neighbor. And it's almost - what I tell people is it's almost like picking a partner for a business more than a romantic partner. You know, the way you would want to vet the credentials of a potential corporate partner, that's what you do with romantic partners, with marital partners, in the 19th century. And so Darcy becomes this fantasy combination of both of those trends and allows readers to swoon over him as a romantic catch who's also familiar.

And in terms of why this shift happens, I mean, there's a lot of reasons why it happens and why it happened quickly, but one of the biggest reasons is industrialization. For the first time in Jane Austen's lifetime, it becomes possible to be a self-made man. So if you are a charismatic, energetic, plausible, romantic stranger and you're a guy like Wickham, that's not going to get you very far. You don't have inherited money. You know, you can't really do anything with those qualities except try to trick people. But 10, 20 years later, you might be starting a business. You might be a captain in the Navy who takes a lot of prizes. You might parlay your personal qualities into economic success. And so paying attention to people's personal qualities could be now a route to a good, stable life in the future, whereas when you have a patronage system and inherited wealth, personal qualities are just going to distract you from what you should be focusing on, which is who's got the money, who's got the stability. So, I mean, Collins is a member of an older patronage system, the Lady Catherine de Bourgh stuff, you know [laughs]. And he can't understand that things are changing. That women are now going to start judging people based on their personal qualities. In Collins's own economic understanding, personal qualities are irrelevant. You enjoy the patronage of the esteemed Lady Catherine de Bourgh. You have a parsonage, you are going to inherit Longbourn. Like - those are things that will happen. It doesn't matter what kind of person you are.

Lauren [00:46:06] Can we talk for a moment about the norms of the proposal in Collins's age? And specifically, I'm so curious about this tradition of refusal, right? Not real refusal, but the "no, no, no." You know, it makes me think of this, of course, as a negotiation, that you never go right into the first offer. [Laughs] But, you know, it's not as though a different offer would be made. It's not as though the capital would be bumped up in some way if a woman were to refuse. So what was the purpose of this custom?

Talia [00:46:41] Yeah. I mean, I should say, I don't know if this custom occurred in reality. It occurred in novels. And so I think in novels what it's doing is showing that the woman is not after money, is sort of shy in protecting her virtue, and so it makes you like the female character more because she's not just like, "okay, you're a good you're a good enough guy. I'll take you." But I think the other thing to remember about women's reluctance to marry was that for women marrying in the late 18th century and into the 19th century was an absolute disempowerment. They lost their money. They lost their legal status. They lost their families. They lost their name. It was absolutely terrifying to marry. And so you can also understand from that perspective that women might not might not be eager to do it.

Lauren [00:47:27] And yet it was also terrifying not to.

Talia: Exactly.

Lauren: I mean, we'll find out that Charlotte Lucas basically says, "What else can I do? What other choice is there for my own basic comfort?" And of course, considering the Bennett sisters, we all know that they're going to be kicked out of their home unless they marry the person who owns it [affirmation]. And there he is proposing. So I do wonder what you think of Lizzy's refusal and whether that would have seemed like an act of incredible callousness for her family, an act of radical feminism and, you know, a total defense of the heart. [Laughs]

Talia [00:48:05] I think Mrs. Bennett, who is always, you know, people always make fun of her. But I read her quite sympathetically. And I think her outrage would have been shared by a lot of people. And I think with a very few tweaks, the reader would have shared it. That if Mr. Collins had been just sort of two degrees more plausible, you would have felt exactly like Mrs. Bennett. But of course, Austen makes him completely implausible for a reason to turn us against the familiar suitor, to open the door to somebody who is more romantic for not the very first time in history, obviously, but it's a - it's a new kind of fantasy that's going to be very powerful. But he's doing everything right. He's laying out his financial information with, you know, absolute frankness. He's explaining all of his assets. I mean, that's what would happen next, is that they would sit down and he's, you know - and look at the rent rolls and so forth. And he says, "I don't expect any money from you. It's fine." So by his lights, he is actually being a very honorable person.

I mean, marriage is not about pleasure. That's - that is madness. Marriage is a lifelong business arrangement, and it's impossible to get out of it. It's going to have your entire family and your life and and your residence and your name, and most, maybe even more importantly than anything except your family, your lifelong ability to have economic like stability is going to rest on this decision. So if you let yourself be swayed by liking somebody's eyes or liking the way somebody reads poetry or liking the way somebody dances, in making a

decision like that, you're a fool. Just like if you were choosing a business partner and you chose somebody because he was a good dancer or liked Cooper's poetry, you'd be an idiot, you know?

So Lizzy is, is skirting idiocy. I mean, idiocy in the sense of, like, impractical- extreme impracticality that could destroy her family. And her mother's laments, although comical and excessive, are right by that period, by that period's standards. What's Austen's doing that's so brilliant is taking the standard position, which is held by Collins and Mrs. Bennett, and making it ridiculous, and therefore giving women a way to think outside it.

I mean, it's a complicated answer, but I think that for Elizabeth, when she says no to Mr. Collins, it's a clarion cry of freedom that might not have resonated in real life, but for that very reason would have been all the more exciting for readers. Like imagine saying that, you know, imagine doing that. That is so cool. Imagine that the horrible person your parents want to marry, you just get to say no! And like it sticks!

Lauren [00:50:37] And of course, Collins doesn't accept her refusal. He accepts her parents' refusal [affirmation]. They're the ones who have to say, "yes, she means that it's not happening honey."

Talia [00:50:46] Yes. Good point.

Lauren [00:50:47] Talia. It is such a treat to talk to you. Thank you so, so much for joining us. We could go on and on.

Talia [00:50:53] Yeah, thank you. This was a pleasure.

[Ending credit music begins]

Vanessa [00:50:58] 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. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. We are a Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is the great Ariana Nedelman. We are distributed by Acast. Thanks as always to our Jane level Patrons: Viscount Elise Kanagaratnam of Unicornia, Baroness Gretchen Snegas of Breakfast Carbston, Knight Molly Reel of Worcestershire Sauce, the Countess of Kristen Hall, Dame Lea B. of Pickleshire, Dame Becky Boo of Tiaralandia, and Duchess Betty Higgins of Double Bass. Thanks this week to Talia Shaffer, Claudia Johnson, and Ayesha Ramachandran for talking to us. To Lara Glass, Gabi Iori, AJ Jamaraz, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our Patrons. We'll talk to you in two weeks!

[Ending credit music ends]

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