



The
Jane Austen
Pocket Bible

—
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT JANE AND HER NOVELS
—

HOLLY IVINS

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Other reasons Jane Austen didn't marry

Aside from not being able to be with the man she wanted to spend her life with, there are a few other factors which may have contributed to Jane's decision not to marry:

- In 1797 Cassandra's fiancé Tom Fowle died at sea. Tom had been serving as a chaplain in the navy but died of yellow fever before he could return. Cassandra never met anyone else, choosing at the age of just 24 to become a spinster. Jane's own thwarted love affair, combined with her sister's disappointment, may have contributed to her decision to remain single.
- By not marrying Jane was also free from the expectation that she would run a household, giving her the freedom and leisure to write. Jane learned to value the freedom of being single as she watched those around her become slave to the expected roles of wife and mother.

Pocket Fact

Although Jane never had children of her own, she often referred to her novels as her children, saying, 'I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her suckling child'. At another time she referred to Pride and Prejudice as, 'my own darling child'.

MARRYING IN JANE AUSTEN'S TIME

In choosing not to marry, Jane became a spinster, choosing her love of her writing over the expectations of society. But for those

who did marry what did marriage mean? And how did one go about finding a partner?

COURTSHIP

When looking for a partner in Regency society, it was vital that a potential partner was eligible – meaning they were from the right class of society and were wealthy enough to meet family expectations. Young men had to ensure that the lady they were addressing was ‘out’, meaning that the girl was over 16 (the age a girl could marry at) and had formally come out into society. Young men on the other hand would ‘come out’ at 21, meaning most husbands were older than their wives (as is the case for most of the matches in Austen’s novels). This was because for the eldest sons who were set to inherit, this was the age that they no longer needed their father’s consent to enter into a contract, including an engagement. For gentlemen who didn’t have an inheritance coming, the older age meant that they had time to establish their career and raise enough money to support a wife and family.

During Austen’s lifetime young men and women would normally meet at dances, or would be introduced through family and friends. When young people did meet, a young lady would always be accompanied by a chaperone, meaning couples had very little chance for one-on-one conversation. Dancing provided a chance for some private conversation, but it was only acceptable for a couple to dance together twice before it was considered that an arrangement existed between them. Apart from dancing, young people could also meet at family parties, where they could play cards, join in conversation with the rest of the family, or perhaps even perform a duet together. It is obvious therefore that couples did not get the chance to spend any time alone together. In fact it was very much frowned upon for young men and women to be alone together, either walking or riding together. We see the scandal it causes when Marianne constantly goes out in Willoughby’s gig (a type of carriage, see glossary), and Catherine’s worry about going out with John Thorpe. A couple couldn’t even write to each other until they were engaged, once again showing why Elinor is convinced Marianne is engaged to Willoughby when

she sees Marianne sending him several letters. In never being alone together it seems that Charlotte Lucas may have been right: ‘Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance’.

In Her Own Words 🕒

Jane once sarcastically wrote to her niece Fanny that, ‘Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favor of Matrimony’.

The role of mothers in matchmaking

Austen’s novels are all courtship novels, meaning that nearly all of the action within them revolves around finding and winning a partner. What Austen’s novels also show is how much mothers would be involved in making this match.

Top matchmaking/meddling mothers

1. **Mrs Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*)**. *The ultimate meddling mother, whose only purpose in life is to find husbands for her daughters. Mrs Bennet spends almost the entirety of the novel making matches for her daughters. Although she frequently embarrasses her daughters, she is the most successful matchmaker in Austen’s novels with three of her five daughters married by the end of the novel.*
2. **Lady Russell (*Persuasion*)**. *Makes a terrible job of trying to see Anne happily married. She dissuades her from marrying the man she really loves and spends a large part of the novel trying to persuade her to marry a man who turns out to be a complete scoundrel.*
3. **Mrs Weston (*Emma*)**. *Emma’s former governess, who tries to match Emma with her new son-in-law, Frank Churchill. Emma doesn’t really care for Frank though and is distracted by her own matchmaking schemes. This is*

lucky because Frank is secretly engaged to another woman for the entire novel!

4. **Mrs Thorpe (*Northanger Abbey*)**. Probably the most realistic representation of a matchmaking Regency mother. Mrs Thorpe is a widow with only a small income who pushes her daughter to find a rich husband, as we see when she openly discusses the settlement from Mr Morland. Mrs Thorpe turns out to be rather unsuccessful though as her mercenary encouragements cause Isabella to drive both interested men away.
5. **Mrs Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*)**. Allows her daughter Marianne too much freedom in her relationship with Willoughby, while at the same time not realizing how much Elinor cares for Edward.
6. **Sir Thomas Bertram (*Mansfield Park*)**. OK he's a man but as his wife is too lazy, Sir Thomas is forced to act as a matchmaker instead. He proves to be terrible though, allowing Maria to marry a man she despises for money, meaning she later has an affair and leaves her husband. Sir Thomas' other daughter Julia also elopes. Sir Thomas also tries to force Fanny to marry a man she clearly dislikes and sends her away from the house when she refuses to do so.

PROPOSALS

Once a young man had seen enough (or as much as was acceptable!) of a young woman to decide that he wanted to marry her how did he ask her to be his wife? The proposal was often the first time a young couple would be alone together and he would ask the lady to accept him. This would normally take place at her family home and while engagement rings did exist, they weren't common. At this point the young lady could accept or refuse the proposal. As Henry Tilney points out this 'power of refusal' was the only control women held in the situation. It was rare for a young woman to refuse a proposal though since, as Mr Collins points out to Elizabeth, if a lady had been proposed to once already she was

unlikely to receive another proposal. The only other power a woman possessed was the ability to pull out of an engagement. Again, this was a very rare occurrence (although Jane Austen herself did this!). Once an engagement had been formed it was highly frowned upon for a man to break it off, hence Edward's feeling of being trapped in his engagement to Lucy.

If a young man was accepted, he would then go to the young lady's father to ask permission to marry his daughter. Sometimes he would also ask his own father, as James Morland does in *Northanger Abbey*. Once a young lady's father had approved the match (which he would normally have witnessed developing from the beginning), the marriage articles would be drawn up. This was a contract outlining the distribution of wealth and property in the marriage and what would happen to the wife and any children on the death of the husband (marriage articles were a bit like pre-nuptial agreements drawn up today.) A jointure might also be drawn up – an agreement outlining that the wife would be guaranteed to receive part of her husband's property on his death – although these were more unusual.

Pocket Fact

At the 2009 Jane Austen Festival in Bath, one couple decided to honor their favorite author by having a Regency style wedding. The ceremony took place one afternoon during the festival and all of the guests were required to wear Regency dress. It does make one wonder if there was enough lace to satisfy Mrs Elton though!

WEDDINGS

Before the wedding a bride would go shopping for her wedding clothes, purchasing the entire wardrobe of clothes she would now need as a wife and mistress of her own home. The actual wedding dress wasn't as important as it is now – normally a bride would wear her best dress, which was usually a white dress as white was a sign of wealth. The groom in the meantime would be busy preparing his home for the bride's arrival and traditionally buying a new coach.

The wedding ceremony would take place in the morning and the party would then go for a wedding breakfast. Immediately after the breakfast the couple would set off on their honeymoon, while their guests enjoyed the wedding cake (apart from Mr Woodhouse who would worry it is too rich!).

Pocket Fact

Considering that most of the action in her novels leads up to a proposal from the leading man, surprisingly, most of the proposals that occur in Jane's novels aren't laid out word for word. Austen, as the narrator, normally just describes that the moment has occurred. Only in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* are we witness to the word-for-word confessions of love from the leading man: in Darcy's second confession of love to Elizabeth, and in Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne.

ELOPEMENT

If a young couple didn't have their parents' permission to marry they could choose to elope, running off to Gretna Green in Scotland (where a couple younger than 21 did not need their parents' consent to marry) to be married. This was extremely scandalous behavior and a couple HAD to marry after this or they would be ruined in society forever. We can see the terrible consequences elopement could have in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Lydia runs away with Wickham. Not only does Lydia ruin her own reputation, she also jeopardizes the chances for her sisters to marry well, as no man would want to be associated with this background. Although Wickham and Lydia are made to marry and the scandal somewhat covered up, at the end of the novel Austen does point out the detrimental effect this one decision has had on Lydia's reputation. Another example of elopement occurs in *Mansfield Park*, when Julia runs away with Mr Yates. Although her father condemns this shocking behavior she is saved from some of his wrath by the worse behavior of her sister, who runs away from her husband with another man.

Another option for young couples whose families didn't approve of their relationship was to enter into a secret engagement. Again, although Austen uses this circumstance in her novels she makes clear the moral uncertainty this situation could place one in. We see that Jane Fairfax becomes physically ill from the stress of trying to conceal her engagement to Frank Churchill, and we see the unhappiness Edward suffers from entering into an engagement with a woman he barely knows and who turns out to be completely wrong for him.

Although Jane portrays these other types of courtships in her novels, she uses the less than desirable fates of the characters who pursue these paths to outline the true morals people should be following.

THOSE WHO DIDN'T MARRY

For gentlemen to remain single during this period was not unusual, as many had their own fortune and home. In fact, many only chose to marry much later in life, as we see in *Sense and Sensibility* when the older Colonel Brandon marries Marianne Dashwood.

For women though, remaining single after a certain age carried more of a stigma, and while gentlemen could carry on the same lifestyle as they had followed in their youth, women would enter a new stage of life as a spinster. This was a path that both Jane and Cassandra chose, meaning they became the chaperone aunt, rather than the married mother. The figure of the spinster can be seen in the character of Miss Bates in *Emma*.

In Her Own Words

As Jane grew older she embraced her role as chaperone to her nieces, once writing to Cassandra 'As I must leave off being young I find many douceurs in being a sort of chaperon, for I am put on the sofa near the fire, and can drink as much wine as I like'.

Of course this option was only open to women who could afford to care for themselves, or who had families to support them. For