
The Literary Analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* Through an Early Renaissance Prism

Interpretations of literature will always fluctuate between authors, critics, and readers alike. Literature is a looking glass that reflects many different images, thoughts, and messages for the reader. The beauty of looking into this mirror is that every viewer sees a different image, a different interpretation of what is initially there. *Pride and Prejudice* is no exception to this observation. Jane Austen's novel appealed to many literary audiences of many centuries because this book, in many ways, is a social commentary about manners. Her work is officially classified as a realist novel that was made popular during the Romantic period. While the novel found success in its time period of the early 1800s, the work needs to be examined in the Early Renaissance period that began around the 1400s. Seeing the novel in a different time period can be helpful to see if any of the novel's original content will still be in place. If Jane Austen's novel was written during the Early Renaissance period, there would be many stylistic and content changes to her work. These changes would be influenced by the notable Early Renaissance texts and authors such as Baldassare Castiglione, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas More. There is no concrete evidence to officiate the claims made in this paper. The speculations and inferences will be drawn from inferences of Romantic and Early Renaissance eras. While *Pride and Prejudice* was originally written and published during the Romantic Period, Jane Austen's narrative would have been written very differently in Early Renaissance in terms of style and content.

Having *Pride and Prejudice* transform into an Early Renaissance text means that change is inevitable. There are many aspects to the novel that will become effected once the Jane Austen's novel is seen through the eyes of an Early Renaissance man/woman. Character and authorship are bound to be impacted. Education and religion will have been influenced to change in the novel. Dress and wealth will be things that are rethought once the novel is seen in a new light. The genre and language will also have major differences made. These new changes that are awaiting *Pride and Prejudice* are based upon interpretation, perspective, viewpoint, and influence, and imagination, which all happen to be components for the looking glass of literature.

To begin this interpretation of Austen's work, the gender roles of the authorship and characters would be switched if *Pride and Prejudice* was an Early Renaissance text. For instance, the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* would be different in the Early Renaissance Period. The Romantic period was an exciting era, especially for women, because a large number of literary works were beginning to be written by women and read by women (Lynch and Stillinger 13).

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This surge of females in literature heightened the literacy of women across the globe. Female success began to rival men for the first time in literary history. However, the Early Renaissance period was dominated by men. This meant that the majority of famous authors were male. Therefore, *Pride and Prejudice* would have most likely been written by a male author. This male author would have the possibility to transform the novel to create more room to centralize on male characters (such as Mr. Bennet or Mr. Darcy). This inference is drawn from the fact that famous stories of the Early Renaissance focused on male characters trying to climb the social ladder (Cleland). For instance, *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli with the intent of teaching male audiences how to achieve and maintain political power (which was a major theme of Early Renaissance works). The Early Renaissance's theme of political power would then discredit the theme of love present in *Pride and Prejudice*. All in all, these inferences show that the female visions of Elizabeth and Darcy would become a male vision with a male focus of superiority. Having the narrative from a male Early Renaissance point of view thus catalyzes other literary changes in *Pride and Prejudice*.

If present-day audiences assume that Early Renaissance authors decide not to accept the idea that the main character is a male, then the possibilities for Elizabeth's character to change are most definite. For one, it is well-known that Elizabeth is an inherently smart character, as well as her sister Jane (Knapp). That being said, since Elizabeth is a smart and active character in the Romantic period, she would also be a smart character if the text was an Early Renaissance piece. In fact, Elizabeth and her sister Jane would be humanists. Definitively, a humanist believed in the idea of a well-rounded education that made them an active person of society, thus benefitting society (Cleland). This claim could then justify for Elizabeth's (and Jane's) inherent intelligence. Having this love of education as a pillar of their interests would explain how they make their decisions in the novel. Another aspect of society that would have affected Elizabeth's character would have been religion. Since there is an absence of religious characters in Jane Austen's novel. Early Renaissance authors would have inserted religion into the novel since their time period was experiencing the Protestant Reformation. Elizabeth would have married a member of the clergy (not Darcy) because this was a normality during Early Renaissance times (Cleland). This difference in Elizabeth's evolution as a character in *Pride and Prejudice* would appeal to Early Renaissance audiences. While Elizabeth would have transformed under Early Renaissance conventions, there are plenty of other conventions that could impact other characters of *Pride and Prejudice*.

To conclude the stylistic interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice*, one final item to examine is the suggestion that the Austen's characters would have different views of wealth and clothing in a Early Renaissance setting. Jane Austen's Romantic era novel depicted women and men seeking marriage and wealth as a means of success. Primarily, this portrayal of women appealed to Romantic audiences, but the same cannot be said for Early Renaissance audiences. The female and male characters in the Early Renaissance depiction of *Pride and*

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Pride and Prejudice would have focused more on the art of achieving sprezzatura. This term came directly from the Early Renaissance text *The Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione. The art of sprezzatura was the act of making hard human actions look easy and was a quality that was striven for by men. By possessing the nonchalance of sprezzatura, it made (typically) men appear well-rounded, successful, and desired (“Castiglione on Sprezzatura”). In the original *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy explained that he wanted a woman to possess many human talents and traits when he says the following: A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved. (Austen 76)

Darcy’s wishes sound very resonant of Early Renaissance sprezzatura because he wants someone, a woman, to have many qualities that appear to come off seamlessly. Early Renaissance time value social rank from positions held and authority, rather than the idea of just wealth and property that Romantic audiences valued. Therefore, the Early Renaissance depiction of *Pride and Prejudice* would include male and female characters vying for sprezzatura to get and maintain power in society rather than characters searching for marriage and property. Also stylistically speaking, the clothing of characters would have been different if *Pride and Prejudice* were written in the Early Renaissance period. The original novel and various adaptations (like film for example) depict characters of this time period in very elaborate attire. Fancy gowns, corsets, complicated hairstyles, nice suits, and sparkling jewelry are just some of the clothing choices made for the characters of Austen’s novel.

However, if the novel were put into the Early Renaissance period, there is a chance that the characters could be dressed very plainly and subtle. This inference is drawn from the direct plot of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. In this work, there is a declaration that states, “Fine clothing was not respected in that land, silk was despised, and gold a badge of contempt; therefore they Utopians always came in the very plainest of their clothes.” (More, Lynch and Stillinger 612). While this may not be a completely accurate portrayal of what Austen’s original characters might look like, speculation drawn from More’s narrative fuels this imaginative concept. Early Renaissance audiences valued their image based on power, not image based on material things that money could buy (Cleland). These possible Early Renaissance stylistic choices that could be implemented into *Pride and Prejudice* stem from a combination of inferences and suppositions from past famous era authors that would persuade change in the Romantic era novel.

Pride and Prejudice would have major changes to the way the narrative looks from its original form if it were put into the hands of an Early Renaissance author. To begin, the Romantic era was known for its new interest in poetry. Romantic era audiences were, “simply mad for poetry” (Lynch and Stillinger 11). Although Jane Austen’s narrative is not a poem, audiences need to

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understand the age of which Austen's work defied the Romantic norm and became popular. Novels during this time period were not as popular as poems. The Romantic period, "centered on works of imagination, nonfiction prose forms" (Lynch and Stillinger 22). These beliefs of the Romantic age would not be held firm with Early Renaissance views. Works from the Early Renaissance tended to be intellectual exercises and would come in the forms of guides, handbooks, and short stories. Also, works from this time period would tend to be more abstract than the Romantic period (Cleland).

All of the differences mean that *Pride and Prejudice* would have possibly been envisioned as a more abstract handbook. Austen original work could also be rethought to be about family life since it was a popular topic discussed in the Early Renaissance. Changing *Pride and Prejudice* to be a work more centralized on family life could mean more of a focus on the relationship between Elizabeth and her sisters/parents. On this same analytical level, the language of *Pride and Prejudice* would be very different if the text was put into the Early Renaissance. *Pride and Prejudice* is written with sophisticated (often complex) syntax. For instance, Elizabeth complicatedly explains how she has misjudged when she exclaims: How despicably I have acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable mistrust! How humiliating is this discovery!

Till this moment I never knew myself. (Austen 226-227) Instead of using Austen's original diction and syntax, an Early Renaissance author might write something that reads, "A true woman must understand the errors of her ways and accepts the repercussions that follow. For women are so easily into believing the first thing they think or are told. When a woman can exhibit good judgment, she will be successful in all faucets of life." This type of sentence and grammar structure is inspired by the format of Early Renaissance text *The Prince*. Writing *Pride and Prejudice* like *The Prince* transforms the narrative into an allegory-like work about understanding one's self and bettering it. The language would be easier to follow and ideas would not take as long to transcribe if the text was written in the Early Renaissance era. *Pride and Prejudice* would come similar to the guides or handbooks that flourished during the Early Renaissance. Seeing the novel through a new perspective can bring out new ideas about *Pride and Prejudice* that audiences may have not realized at the surface level such as 'bettering one's self' that was mentioned previously.

Some new interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice* as an Early Renaissance piece may be easier for some audiences to understand and interpret better than others. In conclusion, the Romantic Period was home to many historical events, thus one being the publication of one of Jane Austen's most cherished novels. Seeing the novel as an Early Renaissance text helps to provide audiences with some new insight into how being an author and a reader coexist simultaneously. People will and do see things differently. The ideas formed within this essay

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come from upon interpretation, perspective, viewpoint, influence, and imagination. This combination of ways to think about conceptualizing a novel show how this narrative reflects many different images and new ideas for its readers, just like looking in a mirror would. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel that takes a look in the mirror and embodies many versatile looks (literary eras), one of them being the Early Renaissance model.

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