Reason and Emotion in *Pride and Prejudice*

“‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Romanticism’ are frequently used to suggest contrasting ways of looking at the world” or as “binary oppositions, such as reason versus emotion; objectivity versus subjectivity; control versus spontaneity” (Kitson 35). However, recent studies have argued against this opposition, suggesting that there was not a clean break between the ideas of the 18th century Enlightenment and those of the 19th century Romanticism (Kitson 35). *Pride and Prejudice*, written during the transition between these periods, is an example of this overlap in ideas. In fact, the novel has a way of uniting and balancing these two forces, Austen highlights the importance of this balance through the various marriages in the novel and development of the novel’s characters.

The marriages in *Pride and Prejudice* illustrate the importance of both reason and feeling, since marriages based on only one aspect, either rationality or emotion, are not depicted as ideal or happy, while those with both are. For instance, Charlotte Lucas is described as intelligent and unromantic. She makes a purely rational choice when picking Mr. Collins as a husband. She is fully aware of what she is doing. Austen explains Charlotte’s choice in the following way:

> Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. --Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (Austen 120)

Her choice is completely rational and practical. And while she is not punished for her choice, she is not in an ideal marriage. Her marriage only functions because she uses her intelligence to keep
Mr. Collins and herself apart as much as possible and chooses to ignore the silly and embarrassing things he does and says. There is no emotional connection between them. This example shows the value placed by Austen on both emotion and reason, since in her novel marriage without one is not really a complete marriage with intimacies and exchanges.

Another example of a less than ideal choice in marriage is Lydia’s marriage, which is made without the benefit of reason. Instead, she bases her marriage on only fleeting emotions and lust. She is a flirt and runs away with Wickham when the chance presents itself. Lydia’s marriage is unstable. Austen writes, “They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer” (366). Lydia’s marriage shows the outcome of marrying hastily and without rationally thinking about the choice. Not only does their lust and attraction soon fade, but also they have nothing else to fall back on within their marriage. This shows the recklessness of acting only on emotion, with disregard to reason.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet present yet another example of a poor marriage based only on fleeting emotions. Mr. Bennet married his wife based on her youth and beauty, and their marriage is comical at best and disastrous at worst. Mr. Bennet admits to having no respect for his spouse. The Bennets’ marriage not only affects them, but also negatively affects their children’s own chances in life. This marriage shows the negative consequences of basing important decisions like marriage on just temporary emotions.

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth represent the other side of this equation: what is possible when emotion and reason come together. Reason and emotion both play a role in Darcy and Elizabeth deciding to marry. When Elizabeth agrees to marry Darcy, she knows that he is a person she can respect, and that their personalities, while different, will complement each other. He can also
provide a good life for her, which she realized while visiting Pemberley. These are the rational thoughts that go into her decision. However, feelings also play a role in her decision; she is attracted to Darcy and has fallen in love with him. While in tears, Elizabeth tells her father, “‘I do, I do like him,’ ‘I love him’” (Austen 365). It is also clear that Darcy is a rational, sensible man, but also one who can be moved by feeling, as seen in the ardor of feeling he shows for Elizabeth by proposing to her despite her silly family and against the wishes of his family. This combination of reason and emotion makes their marriage the happiest, and most ideal, in the novel.

Another couple in the novel that displays this combination of reason and feeling is Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. The two have a good, happy marriage because each possesses both of these qualities. Mrs. Gardiner shows her rationality when she warns Elizabeth not to get too close to Wickham. Her depth of emotion is evident in the way she senses that there is something between Elizabeth and Darcy. Mr. Gardiner also shows this combination in the way he handles Lydia’s elopement. He is capable of dealing rationally with the situation when the Bennets are not, but he is also thoughtful and caring enough to do this for his niece. One literary critic, Alice Chandler, writes:

Where Elizabeth’s parents illustrate the possible future miseries of marriage, the Gardiners and their children suggest its promises. Can one doubt that they are comfortably wedded? Their constant conjectures about Elizabeth and Darcy suggest intimate bedtime conversations and their slow arm-in-arm walk at Pemberley (arranged to allow Elizabeth time to be with Darcy) implies a tacit understanding of their common aims. They are actually surrogate parents to both Elizabeth and Darcy. Their highly practical and highly principled handling of Lydia’s elopement sets a standard for warmth and firmness that Elizabeth and Darcy must learn to combine before they marry. (101)
Chandler’s explanation suggests that the Gardiners even set a model that Elizabeth and Darcy try to follow in their own marriage. Austen shows, through the Gardiners’ marriage, all the positive outcomes possible when people use both their reasoning and emotional skills. This message is evident in how she presents them so ideally and happily married.

The preconceived notions of male and female temperaments popular in the 1700’s allow for another possible interpretation of the balance Austen strikes between emotion and rationality within the marriages depicted in the novel. Chandler comments on the 18th century idea that men were considered rational and women emotional; with this theory in mind, she explains that Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage represents a combining and balancing of these two forces (97-98). She states, “Darcy’s containment, his distrust of ‘raptures,’ his self-proclaimed caution in forming his implacable judgments, all show how apt the description [of male rationality] is for him. The feminine attributes [based on feelings] of quickness, brilliance, and spontaneity and sprightliness seem equally applicable to Elizabeth” (Chandler 98). This equal marriage of reason and feeling is seen in Georgiana, Darcy’s sister, who will benefit from this combination in her guardians. It is this, Chandler contends, that will give her a more auspicious future than afforded Lydia, who is her foil. Lydia can be seen as Georgiana’s foil in that they both eloped or came close to eloping, and that both were raised with either just emotion, as in Lydia’s case, or all reason in Georgiana’s case (Chandler 101). Chandler explicates,

Immature enough to be considered Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s child, she [Georgiana] must be retrained by the lessons their own love has taught them. The next-to-last paragraph of the novel, which emphasizes the freedom and spontaneity Elizabeth will teach Georgiana, is a corrective to her too-rigid upbringing. Ideally, she will be a child of Darcy’s head and Elizabeth’s heart, of his principles and her feelings or…of the union of rationality and emotion that their marriage represents. (101-102).
This alternative way of viewing the balance of emotion and rationality still shows the value placed on both by Austen, as it is the combination that makes Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage so ideal. It is a balance not present in either the Mr. Collins/ Charlotte marriage or the Wickham/ Lydia marriage as the former is all reason and practicality and the latter entirely lustful and fleeting feelings.

The importance of both reason and emotion is also evident in the character development throughout the book, specifically in the ways both Darcy and Elizabeth grow during the course of the novel. Darcy, in addition to overcoming his pride and prejudices, also gains from Elizabeth a better understanding of emotion. He is very rational throughout the novel and even in emotional situations, such as when he first proposes to Elizabeth, he seems to fall back on his rationality. He is afraid to feel what he is feeling for Elizabeth and so presents it as an irrational choice on his part. He is unable to see the validity of emotion when it comes to decisions. On the other hand, Elizabeth, while intelligent and sensible, allows her emotions to dictate her opinions, at least when it comes to Darcy, who insulted her and wounded her pride. She believes Wickham partly because she dislikes Darcy and wants to think ill of him. Their interactions with each other help them both strike a better balance between reason and emotion. Elizabeth is nudging Darcy into being a more emotional person capable of acting with spontaneity and playfulness, and of using his feelings to influence his actions. An example of this is Darcy’s admission that it was his feeling for Elizabeth that caused him to arrange and pay for Wickham and Lydia’s marriage: "'If you will thank me,' he replied, 'let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your family owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of you'” (Austen 346). Darcy showed Elizabeth the need to sometimes keep one’s feelings in check, lest
they overrule reason and to look at information rationally from all angles, regardless of her like or dislike for the person who shares the information. This growth throughout the novel shows the importance Austen places on both rationality and feelings in making people thoughtful, wise, and well-rounded.

Jane Austen’s most famous novel, though called Pride and Prejudice, could be titled reason and emotion or rationality and feeling, as these concepts play throughout the novel as do the vices in the title. These forces of mind and heart, often considered opposites, are shown to balance each other out in the novel. Austen shows the combination of the two forces as positive and important in the marriages portrayed throughout the book and in the development of the two main characters, Elizabeth and Darcy. This combination culminates in Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage. Interestingly, by using marriage, Austen is able to show the importance and benefits of wedding the ideals of the Enlightenment and Romanticism together. It is the marriage of these two supposed opposites that shapes the novel’s characters and the choices they make for the better; and it is the divorce of these two ideas that leads to negative repercussions for the characters and their decisions.

Works Cited

