

“NO” MEANS “NO”: A CASE STUDY ON LANDLORDS BEING REJECTED IN *MANSFIELD PARK* AND *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the intriguing cases of marriage proposals refusal present in Jane Austen's novels *Mansfield Park* (originally published in 1814) and *Pride and Prejudice* (dated 1813). In these, two outstanding suitors, Mr. Crawford and Mr. Darcy, proposed marriage to the respective heroines, Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet, only to be rejected, despite these being the most lucrative and attractive offers they would likely receive throughout their lives. The methodology used involves an analysis of the historical and social context of the works, focusing on matrimonial relationships and societal expectations prevalent in 19th-century England. The reasons behind the heroines' refusals will be examined, as well as how this significantly alters the course of events in the aforementioned novels. Consequently, our argument is that such refusals provide a space for confrontational dialogues, revealing the importance of self-criticism and these same men's willingness to acknowledge their own perceived flaws before receiving an affirmative response. We intend to provide a reflection on the role of marriage (also as a means of social advancement), but also on the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the crucial role of self-development in building lasting relationships.

Keywords: Jane Austen; *Mansfield Park*; *Pride and Prejudice*; refusals; matrimonial relationships.

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Considerações iniciais

“You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; (...) that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should have been better off with anyone else. You will allow all this?”

— JANE AUSTEN,
Northanger Abbey

In Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, the three Ward sisters married men from different social classes, with Fanny Price’s aunt rising in social status by marrying Sir Thomas, while her mother’s status declined after marrying outside her class and clan. The success of one sister and the failure of the other on the marriage market show that, although sons and daughters had a say in selecting a partner, the compelling pursuit of a spouse was predominantly underpinned by an economic rationale, since marrying was one of the few methods, particularly for women, of achieving upward mobility, as Caroline Bingley was all too aware. In more dire cases, a woman without personal fortune or means of earning a livelihood required a husband for financial security, especially in the absence of male siblings. On the other hand, a wealthy single man might choose to have a wife but was not necessarily in need of one, while a poor one could charm his way into an heiress’ heart and solve his problems, as Mr. Wickham tried both with Miss King and Georgiana Darcy.

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In light of this historical and social context, this essay endeavors to explore the intriguing cases in which two landlords, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Crawford, considered to be excellent suitors, proposed to the heroines without fortunes of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, only to be refused despite those being the most lucrative and alluring offers they were ever likely to receive. We shall argue these refusals, which fundamentally switched the course of events in the novels, provided a platform for confrontational dialogue, and that the likelihood of future acceptance hinged on the willingness by the part of the men to acquiesce and address perceived personal shortcomings. This is the decisive factor that prompted a positive response for one of them, as the other decided to flee, leaving behind a deplorable aftermath.

As rejection is a universally unpleasant experience, and because some suitors knew that not every woman was fortunate enough to receive more than one proposal, they would not take “no” for an answer and made several attempts to prevail over disinclination. In *P&P*, Mr. Collins professed that it was customary for young ladies to reject a proposal out of modesty at first when secretly longing to boost passion, and declared it was not plausible that Elizabeth would collect another proposal. To do so, he was supported by conduct books, such as Fordyce’s *Sermons* from 1766, which provided advice for bachelors on how to properly approach courtship during the Georgian Era. Also, in the manual *Shall girls propose?* published in 1893, we see the enduringness of these ideas when the author, who went by “Speculative Bachelor”, stated:

To refuse, and yet not dismiss your appeal, requires on their part no little tact and philosophy. Most girls think that if you capture them easily, you will be led to esteem them lightly. They are apt, therefore, to throw obstacles in your way and make you struggle for their hand. Doing this diplomatically, so that they shall not lose you at last, often requires a high degree of art. (pp. 77-78)

This helps to grasp the careful pondering that women often undertook, not only about accepting proposals but also about how to reject them. Among the thoughts to be considered was the factor that silence was frequently misconstrued as encouragement, which could conflict with their intention to eschew unwanted advances. To illustrate this concept of perseverance notwithstanding being consecutively turned down, we return to Mr. Collins’ own speech: “(...) sometimes the refusal is repeated a second, or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long.” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 100). He was hit by five unequivocal rejections from Elizabeth Bennet during one single meeting. She could not have spoken plainer, but he still believed in her coyness because that was what he was taught to think of women. This scene also serves as a potent rebuttal to the portrayal of women in certain conduct literature as

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either excessively modest or inclined to mercenarily reject proposals in anticipation of better offers. Elizabeth challenged this notion by proclaiming that women are rational beings who know their own desires and are capable of making their own judgments.

Apart from Mr. Collins, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Crawford, albeit convention demanded them to express some anxious doubts, also proposed with the full expectation of acceptance and were surprised when met with a negative. Mr. Darcy had “no doubt of a favourable answer” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 171), while Mary endorsed Henry Crawford’s goals towards Fanny professing: “(...) ask her to love you, and she will never have the heart to refuse” (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 255). Such optimistic backgrounds helped to highlight, by contrast, the constancy of Elizabeth and Fanny to their own wills and to reinforce the idea that “no” means “no”. Once presented with firm rejections, Crawford and Darcy found themselves in a similar but unforeseen and new scenario, one because of his pride and aloofness, and the other owing to his debauchery record, *i. e.*, his capability of “great seductions”. Nevertheless, how they saw the refusals (as a definite “no”, or as a “maybe”) and how they proceeded afterwards was remarkably diverse.

Although Mr. Darcy initially misinterpreted Elizabeth’s shock to his ill-timed proposal as an invitation to declare his love for her, afterwards he showed respect for her autonomy by refraining from exerting undue influence or coercion to sway her decision. As he affirmed, his letter did not bring a renewal of his proposal, but rather a vindication of his honor. Still, the impact of her refusal was profound in both, urging Darcy to face up to his ungentlemanly temperament while Elizabeth reevaluated her unfounded biases, coming to the sense she had been blinded by vanity. This marked the beginning of their journey towards self-discovery and mutual comprehension that brought them closer together. Distinctly, Mr. Crawford saw Fanny’s rejection as an unprecedented challenge to prove himself and assert dominance over her. He changed his approach and began acting in ways he thought she might approve, such as improving his landholdings and paying closer attention to his tenants – or, at least, talking about doing all this. His short-lived determination went akin to the adage “*He who laughs last, laughs best,*” as seen in: “He had been apt to gain hearts too easily. His situation was new and animating.” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 282). In regards to Mr. Darcy’s reaction to Elizabeth’s first unfavorable reply in *P&P*, it seemed to carry a questioning tone of “*Who dares say ‘no’ to me?*” — only for him to realize then that he had indeed deserved it.

In his pursuit of Fanny Price, Mr. Crawford started off by seeking to reform his ways after she became the first woman ever to reject him, but old habits soon resurfaced when he did not earn the desired rewards quickly. In truth, Crawford had been playing games within the Bertram family, exhibiting no enthusiasm with Fanny until, by the absence of Maria

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and Julia, “she was the only girl in company for you to notice,” exclaimed Mary, also adding, “and you must have a somebody” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 199). From the outset, he was conscious of the danger he posed not only to her, but to the family, as shown by the occurrence in which he held Maria’s hand longer than necessary, a gesture that could be used as evidence in the charge of lust and adultery, as Craig posits: “Any display of affection, such as hand holding, would hold up as evidence in court. (...) At that time, courts assumed the guilt, not the innocence, of the accused (...)” (2014, p. 19). Even so, the burden of blame for Mr. Crawford’s transgressions fell to Fanny, as Mrs. Norris and Mary Crawford implied that she could have prevented them just by marrying him, as expressed by the latter: “It is all her fault. Simple girl! — I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, (...) Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object.” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 396). Because this accusation originated from selfish characters such as Miss Crawford and Mrs. Norris, it should not be taken seriously. Fanny was no more answerable for her cousin’s affair than Maria was the sole responsible for it, but she was the only one punished in the end. Austen was clear with her uneasiness with the societal norms that perpetuated unequal power interplays and double standards in the Regency Era, which set the constrained isolation of Maria against Mr. Crawford’s remaining free to prey upon other women.

Fanny, outside of having witnessed Mr. Crawford’s dubious characters, appeared to be mindful of how a woman’s financial and social condition was intrinsically tied to the prime man in their lives, as a rule father or husband, from whom they were not permitted to exist independently. From this perspective, a man’s treatment of those who are dependent on him or who occupy a lower social level is indicative of his probable conduct towards his wife. We have a vivid view of this in *P&P* when, at Pemberley, Elizabeth was pushed to acknowledge the high esteem in which Darcy was held by his domestic staff. This perception, combined with his changed behavior, eventually evolved into an epiphany that being with him would not necessitate severing ties with her kin, including her uncle and aunt Gardiner, as he no longer held them in contempt. Moreover, Darcy’s deep love, concern and tenderness for Georgiana were manifest through his efforts to assimilate the shameful affair that enveloped her (and even himself) at the hands of Wickham, thus striving to forestall any such indignity from happening again.

After his shift of heart in *P&P*, Darcy played a crucial role in facilitating the marriages of Jane and Bingley, and Lydia and Wickham, saving the Bennet family. Crawford’s mischief-making, conversely, resulted in the dissolution of Maria and Mr. Rushworth’s union, shaming the Bertram family, and in the failure of his own sister’s probable engagement to Edmund Bertram. Darcy sprung up in the end of the novel as a responsible and compassionate figure who looked after those beneath him and whom he felt responsible for, going so far as to

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extend his care to Wickham, despite the latter's past offences. Crawford, on the contrary, ended up the story the same as he began it, the troublemaker. In his particular situation, however, one interesting aspect lies in the fact that, had he persisted in the upright path he proposed to Fanny, it could have granted him an ending similar to Darcy's. According to the narrator's insight, had the elopement not taken place, Edmund would have wedded Mary, subsequently leading Fanny to surrender into marrying Henry, in defiance of her initial shortage of genuine affection towards him:

Could he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman's affections, could he have found sufficient exultation in overcoming the reluctance, in working himself into the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price, there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him. (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 406)

MP suggests that there is no meaningful distinction between habit and identity, given Mr. Crawford emulated the licentious manner of his uncle, Admiral Crawford, who took in and maintained a mistress he never made his wife. On top of that, he showed no interest in offering himself to discussions or accountability whatsoever to rectify the harm he had caused. Crawford repeatedly neglected opportunities to do good or do the right thing that would contribute to his self-education and evolution, whereas Darcy worked to pave the way and ultimately seized it, taking it upon himself to repair the damage caused by a third person, which had unfortunate consequences for two families, his own and the Bennets.

The concept of interpersonal openness is also crucial to fostering healthy and meaningful relationships. It is only when individuals are willing to be vulnerable and honest with each other that genuine connections can be formed. In *MP*, the characters' dynamics illustrate the effects of the lack of openness, as Mr. Crawford and Fanny Price were clouded by the conceptions and assumptions they had of one another. Crawford was not as observant as Fanny, and knew nothing about her except for what he assumed:

I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. I could not tell what she would be at yesterday. What is her character? Is she solemn? Is she queer? Is she prudish? Why did she draw back and look so grave at me? I could hardly get her to speak. I never was so long in company with a girl in my life, trying to entertain her, and succeed so ill! Never met with a girl who looked so grave on me! I must try to get the better of this. Her looks say, 'I will not like you, I am determined not to like you'; and I say she shall. (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 199)

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Fanny hid herself from everybody, even to an extent from Edmund, never confronting Crawford with her criticisms as Elizabeth did. That means Darcy and Elizabeth got to candidly communicate on what they thought each other's flaws were. Despite knowing he was right about Wickham, he did listen to her reproofs of his own nature and engaged in deconstructing the misconceptions she had about him. He did it primarily for self-refinement, as for having no means of knowing if he would ever encounter her again. He even took deliberate measures to prevent her from finding out that he paid for Lydia and Wickham's marriage, with the purpose of sparing her any weight of obligation to reciprocate him.

In comparison, Crawford's moves to win over Fanny were manipulative and dishonest. To succeed, he employed underhanded tactics, such as tricking her into obtaining a necklace through his sister, as well as reaching out to his uncle's influence to help Fanny's beloved brother William become a lieutenant in order to gain her gratitude and acceptance. Also, we should do well to recall that his sole original impetus was to toy with Fanny – as he confessed so, “making a small hole in [her] heart” (AUSTEN, 2011, p. 198) –, only later coming to love her and egoistically believing that she could make him happy, but never thinking about her happiness in return. Darcy, his unfortunate pride aside, after realizing that his feelings for Elizabeth could not be repressed, decided to do the honorable thing from the start, offering her his hand, even if he saw it as a degradation to himself.

Our ultimate reading is that change must emanate from within and cannot be imposed by external forces. In a letter dated March 1817, Austen repudiated the idea of “pictures of perfection” for it made her “sick and wicked” (LE FAYE, 335), strongly emphasizing instead that flaws were part of human experience, and highlighting the importance of being receptive to development. Crawford did not make the necessary efforts himself to effect change, not only because he relied on others to do the work for him but also because he failed to understand how Fanny's rejection reflected on him and was his responsibility. Fanny and Elizabeth declined “magnificent” catches for similar principles, as they neither loved the suitors nor regarded them highly. Fanny, in addition, was in love with another, but Elizabeth, who wasn't, after recognizing that her earlier opinion of Darcy was partly unjust, fell in love and accepted his second proposal. Yet that only happened after he underwent a mortifying review of his performances, and embarked on a path of hard work for both personal and relational growth. Without it, the answer would still have been a resounding “no”. As Crawford engendered himself as the problem, Darcy emerged as the problem solver after understanding that “no” means “no” and that he was, in part, at fault for that refusal, and that is why their stories have had such different outcomes.

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“NÃO” É “NÃO”: ESTUDO DE CASO SOBRE A REJEIÇÃO DOS LANDLORDS EM *MANSFIELD PARK* E *ORGULHO E PRECONCEITO*

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RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo explorar os intrigantes casos de recusa a propostas de casamento presentes nos romances *Mansfield Park* (originalmente publicado em 1814) e *Pride and Prejudice* (datado de 1813) de Jane Austen. Neles, dois pretendentes considerados excelentes, Mr. Crawford e Mr. Darcy, propuseram casamento às respectivas heroínas, Fanny Price e Elizabeth Bennet, apenas para serem rejeitados, apesar de serem estas as ofertas mais lucrativas e atraentes que elas provavelmente receberiam ao longo de toda sua vida. A metodologia utilizada consiste numa análise do contexto histórico-social das obras, com foco nas relações matrimoniais e nas expectativas sociais vigentes na Inglaterra do século XIX. Serão examinadas as razões por trás das recusas das heroínas e como isso altera significativamente o curso dos eventos nos romances supracitados. À vista disso, nosso argumento é o de que tais recusas proporcionam um espaço para diálogos confrontacionais, revelando a importância da autocrítica e da disposição desses mesmos homens em reconhecer suas próprias falhas percebidas antes de receber o “sim”. Tencionamos proporcionar uma reflexão sobre o papel do casamento (também como meio de ascensão social), assim como sobre as complexidades das relações interpessoais e o papel crucial do autodesenvolvimento na construção de relacionamentos duradouros.

Palavras-chave: Jane Austen; *Mansfield Park*; *Pride and Prejudice*; recusas; relações matrimoniais.

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“NO” SIGNIFICA “NO”: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO SOBRE PROPIETARIOS RECHAZADOS EN *MANSFIELD PARK* Y *ORGULLO Y PREJUICIO*

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RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar los intrigantes casos de rechazo a propuestas de matrimonio presentes en dos obras de Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (publicada originalmente en 1814) y *Orgullo y Prejuicio* (fecha en 1813). En ellas, dos destacados pretendientes, Sr. Crawford y Sr. Darcy, propusieron matrimonio a las respectivas heroínas, Fanny Price y Elizabeth Bennet, solo para ser rechazados, a pesar de que fueron las ofertas más lucrativas y atractivas que probablemente recibirían en sus vidas. La metodología utilizada implica un análisis del contexto histórico y social de las obras, centrándose en las relaciones matrimoniales y las expectativas sociales prevalentes en la Inglaterra del siglo XIX. Examinamos las razones detrás de los rechazos de las heroínas y cómo esto último altera significativamente el curso de los eventos en las obras. En consecuencia, nuestro argumento es que dichos rechazos proporcionan un espacio para diálogos confrontativos, revelando la importancia de la autocrítica y la disposición de estos mismos hombres a reconocer sus propias fallas percibidas antes de recibir el “sí”. Pretendemos reflexionar sobre el papel del matrimonio (también como medio de ascenso social), así como sobre las complejidades de las relaciones interpersonales y el papel crucial del autodesarrollo en la construcción de relaciones duraderas.

Palabras-clave: Jane Austen; *Mansfield Park*; *Orgullo y Prejuicio*; rechazos; relaciones matrimoniales.

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