Love’s function in marital decisions

Materialist Feminism in Jane Austen’s *Emma, Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*

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Abstract

In Jane Austen’s *Emma, Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* there is a central theme of finding a marriage partner from economic, social and love perspectives. The focus of this essay is to look from a materialist feminist perspective at how these factors influence the characters’ marital matches. I have also looked at how love as a sought after ideal in marriage conceals the social and economic factors’ influence. The novels all discuss how women’s marginalized economic position forces them to marry. Social factors such as women’s need to find a husband and their expected domestic role have also had an influence. Love works in the novels to support the oppression of women by justifying marriage and concealing women’s unequal role in society.

Keywords:

Austen, Materialist feminism, Domestic role, Women’s oppression, Heterosexual Normative Roles
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Introduction

In this essay I will focus on how economic, social and love factors are connected to marital decisions in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*. In these novels there is a common theme of finding a suitable match in marriage and a discussion of whether love singularly determines an effective match. I examine these novels’ similar themes of love linked to marriage through a materialist feminist perspective. Materialist feminism aims to look at the connection of capitalism and patriarchy and how these factors work together to support the oppression of women. I believe materialist feminism will give me the tools to analyze the social construction of marriage on multiple levels and how this in turn relates to women’s oppression.

*Emma* describes a woman who is independent in her way of speaking freely of what she believes and who has a very fortunate situation in terms of her great wealth. Emma’s passion is to find her friends a suitable match in marriage and she makes her matches based on economic and social factors. *Pride and Prejudice* gives us Elizabeth who is an independent and courageous woman, and whom Mr. Darcy falls in love with despite her low income. Lastly, *Northanger Abbey* contains an independent female main character Catherine, who does not possess a great fortune but a willingness to speak her mind. Catherine falls in love with Mr. Tilney, but their love is challenged by economic factors. These novels have been chosen because they have a similar plot featuring independent female characters from the middle and upper classes who are either in search of a husband, or in the case of *Emma*, helping other female characters in the novel to find a husband. The novels also underline the importance of social and economic factors when marrying and how love is challenged by these factors.

It is clear in the novels that social factors affect the characters’ marriage choices and this is similar to the situation in English society at the beginning of the 19th century. In the social climate in which these novels were written there were certain expectations of men and women. In *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990*, Susan Kingsley writes that in the beginning of the 19th century models of masculinity and femininity were clearly outlined, especially within the middle and upper classes. Males were supposed to be hard-working, self-restrained, religious and faithful to their wives. They were expected to operate in society within work and politics (147). Women on the other hand, had their place in their homes. An “ideological formulation of domesticity” was developed in these times and
described the expectations of the women (147). Women were supposed to be submissive and passive, the guardians of morality and civility, supporting their husbands by taking care of home and family (147-148). In addition, Deborah Wynne describes in *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*, that in the early 19th century a person’s wealth determined her or his status; women therefore became subordinate upon marriage because of their dependence on their husbands. The wife became a “femme covert” which meant that the husband was responsible for all their actions, for example if they misbehaved it was the husband’s fault (21). The wife was in many ways regarded as the property of their husband (21-22). These expectations of women and men influenced the way they behaved and what marriage choices they made. Women had to make sure they found someone to marry in order to fulfil their domestic role and men had to find a marriage partner who would be suitable to take care of home and family (Kingsley 158). In Austen’s novels social factors like the expectations of women and men are evident, and how these expectations affect the characters’ in their marriage choices will be discussed further.

It is not only social factors that influence marriage choices in Austen’s novels, but also economic factors, which is similar to the social situation of the middle and upper classes of the 19th century. Pamela Horn in *Life as a Victorian Lady* explains that in the early 19th century all women’s finances were passed on to the husbands when they entered a marriage (22). John Gillis notes in *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* that wealthy families often arranged suitable marriages for their children in order to make sure the fortune would not be lost. A woman with a large fortune could therefore not marry a man with a small income and women who lacked fortune had great difficulty in finding a good match because men also sought women with an income (137-138). Austen acknowledges the economic issue in her novels and shows how it affects her characters and this will be examined in this essay to see how it alongside social factors and love specifically functions to uphold a social structure like marriage.

Since economic and social factors were very much in focus when finding a marriage partner in the early 19th century, love was not often the primary reason for marrying in most cases. However, as Ellen Campbell explains in “Marriage and Class in the 19th Century British Fiction”, Austen was writing her novel’s in a time were love started to be a factor to consider. There was a conflict between traditional ideas of marrying for class or money and new ideas of love (Campbell 1-6). Therefore, it is interesting to look at Austen’s novels and see how her characters make their marital decisions and the consideration they
are taking to love. In this literature analysis, I will examine how love affects the characters’ marriage choices in these novels. My claim is that the choices mainly are considered through an economic and social perspective but that love is presented as the primary reason. I will discuss how love as an ideal quality in marriage can disguise the structures that support the oppression of women.

The theoretical approach I will use in this essay will be materialist feminism. In Materialist Feminism, Rosemary Hennessey and Chrys Ingraham describe how materialist feminism has its roots within Marxist feminism and that it uses a historical materialist analysis that accounts for the sexual division of labor and the gendered formations of subjectivity. Materialist feminism looks at both historical and contemporary situation and therefore is useful for me in this study. Materialist feminism explains the connection between patriarchy and capitalism, or the links between ideology and women’s domestic labor (10-11). The strategy that materialist feminism promotes is to examine how the combination of social factors such as men and women’s roles in society and also their economic position is related to oppression (187). In other words, in materialist feminism women’s oppression should be looked at from their economic and social situation. Patriarchy and capitalism are not two isolated factors; they are very much dependent on each other. Women in society have supported the capitalist system through low-paid work or unpaid work such as domestic labor in order for the ruling class to be in control of labor. Women have been kept in their low status position due to patriarchal values and ideologies, which in turn have benefited the capitalist system (10-11). Thus, materialist feminism aims to look at women’s oppression from multiple perspectives.

The focus of this essay will be to look at how Austen's three novels present marriage and discuss how the marital matches made in the novels are dependent on economics, social factors and love. Further, I will examine how these bases for the matches function to uphold the social order of a patriarchal society, as the tenets of materialist feminism suggest. I will also look at how love as an ideal quality in marriage works to conceal the social and economic factors’ influence upon marital decisions in these three novels. I intend to look at each novel from three unique angles examining false quality in Emma, the powerful man in Pride and Prejudice and heterosexual gender norms in Northanger Abbey.

There has of course been a lot of research on Jane Austen's novels from a feminist perspective and on the portrayal of marriage. However, I have not come across studies that have compared all the three novels mentioned above together and also looked at marriage
through a materialist feminist perspective. My research will be different in the way of looking at marriage in Austen’s novels from the multiple angles of economy, social factors and love. Previous studies such as “Jane Austen's Ideal man in Pride and Prejudice” by Hayian Gao have talked about the women’s ideal man. Gao examines this ideal in terms of love, property and honesty, and that all three claims are needed for Austen’s ideal man. Similarly, to Gao, I argue that the marriage choices made in the novels are dependent on multiple factors, but I examine love in conjunction with the somewhat different factors of economics and social. In an earlier study of Austen’s work entitled “Money in Austen,” Robert D. Hume analyses money’s importance for women when it comes to marriage in all Austen’s novels. Hume’s work will be useful for me as I consider how Austen’s characters choose to value economic aspects when it comes to marriage, and as mentioned before this will be considered in conjunction with social factors and love. In addition, Campbell’s study depicts how Austen describes a successful marriage partner based on both love and a suitable socioeconomic status. I will also look at these factors in my study so her work will be useful, however my study is different in that I will look at how love functions to hide the other factors.

False Equality in *Emma*

In *Emma*, my claim is that love in the novel works to support the social structure of marriage as a union of equals, but in so doing hides the truth about women’s unequal position in society in terms of politics and economics.

Firstly, the economic factor is central to the characters’ marriage choices in *Emma*. Emma makes her matches with the economic factor in mind and this reflects women’s situation in the early 19th century (Gillis 137-138). The economic disposition women had in these times worked to support the patriarchal system and its structures like marriage, as women had no choice but to marry and also to marry well in order to secure their future. This shows in Emma’s search for a husband for Harriet. Emma does not know of Harriet’s background, but she assumes that she is a daughter of a gentleman and a gentleman of fortune (Austen 52). With this in mind, Emma promotes Mr. Elton as a suitable match for Harriet due to his income and property: “he had a comfortable home for her, and Emma imagined a very sufficient income; for though the vicarage of Highbury was not large, he was known to have some independent property” (28). Mr. Elton is described to be a suitable match because of his presumed income, which is emphasized because Emma
thinks of his fortune and wealth before his personal attributes. Also, Mr. Elton’s approval as a match for Harriet due to economic reasons is shown when Emma contrasts him with Mr. Martin who has not made his fortune yet (23) and therefore is not a suitable match for Harriet. The process Emma takes on in matching Harriet with a suitable partner reveals the influence economic aspects had in marriage choices.

It is not only economic factors that influence characters’ marriage choices in *Emma* but also social factors. In the 19th century, the social system was built upon men and women having different roles in society (Kingsley 147-148). Women were expected to marry mainly due to economic reasons but also due to social pressure. Austen reveals this basis of society in her novels in that genteel women with no fortune are forced to marry in order to keep their social position. Similarly, in reality, women who did not marry and took work as a governess (which was the only real possibility for employment), lost their genteel social position and their lives changed dramatically (Hume 293). In other words, women in the upper and middle classes had no real option but to marry and take on a domestic role, which meant they were not working and influencing the patriarchal society’s perception of women. Instead women entered into a marriage where the man was in control of income and of their actions, which in turn supported this patriarchal system.

In *Emma* it is evident women had a different role in society than men and that not being married is less valued socially. Miss Fairfax’s situation illustrates what could happen to a genteel woman who did not marry. Miss Fairfax was an orphan who had been privileged to grow up with the Campbells and get a good education. However, the Campbells had no fortune to offer her, which meant it was not probable that she would get an offer of marriage and so she was expected to work as a governess (which was the only real possibility for employment), lost their genteel social position and their lives changed dramatically (Hume 293). In other words, women in the upper and middle classes had no real option but to marry and take on a domestic role, which meant they were not working and influencing the patriarchal society’s perception of women. Instead women entered into a marriage where the man was in control of income and of their actions, which in turn supported this patriarchal system.

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women with no fortune occupied and that Austen makes it so that Mr. Churchill saves her when he asks her to marry him.

Miss Bates also represents the reality of a woman with no fortune and no husband. Miss Bates had been married and used to have a certain status which changed when she became a poor widow. Emma’s behavior towards Miss Bates and the reaction from Mr. Knightley signify that Miss Bates has a lower status and should be pitied but not mocked. After a picnic when Emma has made fun of Miss Bates, Mr. Knightley confronts her by asking, “‘How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation? Emma, I had not thought it possible’” (324). This displays how a woman’s value and status were connected to being married and having a good economic position. Mr. Knightley reacts to Emma’s attitude towards Miss Bates because he thinks she needs to be treated with respect and kindness due to her lower status. From a different perspective, Emma’s conversation with Harriet shows Harriet’s fear of ending up as an old maid like Miss Bates. Hume notes that Harriet, like many women in reality dreaded being unable to marry because their value as well as their economy was very much dependent upon it (Hume 293). Emma agrees with Harriet that women who do not have a good economic position would not have a happy future being single. She says, “‘A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid!’” (73). In other words, Miss Fairfax’s and Miss Bates’s situations reveal the connection between a woman’s status and value with the social structure of marriage.

Thus, social aspects like women’s status and its link to being married are discussed in *Emma* and reflect the society of the 19th century. Nonetheless, despite the importance of this and economic factors, characters also fall in love. We meet several characters who seem to be influenced by love when making their marriage choices. We meet Mr. Martin, who is quite taken by Harriet and explains to Mr. Knightley that he aims to marry her because he loves her (50). It is clear from the novel that no one really knows Harriet’s connections, if she has a fortune or not, but he wants her. Likewise, Harriet seems to be in love with Mr. Martin. Even though she is persuaded by Emma to look at alternatives with better fortunes, she does in the end accept Robert Martin. Emma is startled when Mr. Knightley tell her the news, and cries, “‘It seems an impossibility!—You cannot mean to say, that Harriet Smith has accepted Robert Martin” (753). This suggests that Harriet did not listen to Emma’s advice to make her marital choice based on economic and social factors. One reason for this could be that Harriet had considered the economic and social
factors that separated them but that she decided to overlook those aspects because she liked him. This shows how love works to equalize this couple in marriage because Harriet overlooks Mr. Martin’s status.

Furthermore, Mr. Knightley also indicates by his actions that love is important in marriage decisions. Despite being an old family friend he falls in love with Emma, and indicates his greater concern for her happiness than status or wealth by giving up his house and moving in with her for the sake of her happiness. Emma reflects upon this, thinking, “how very few of those men in a rank of life to address Emma would have renounced their own home for Hartfield!” (403). Mr. Knightley knows Emma does not want to abandon her father and because he loves her so much he decides he can live at Hartfield instead. His actions also suggest that his love for her is based on the fact that he sees them as equals. He respects Emma’s wishes of living close to her father by leaving his home for hers.

Also, Emma, who never really intended to marry, chooses to marry for love in the end. She describes Knightly as “Such a companion for herself in the periods of anxiety and cheerlessness before her!—Such a partner in all those duties and cares to which time must be giving increase of melancholy!” (403). This indicates that Emma is truly appreciative of Mr. Knightley’s personal qualities. She has found a partner who she can share and enjoy her life with. Emma’s love for Mr. Knightley also suggest that she sees them as equals and that marriage means they are companions who can support each other in good and bad times.

From these accounts, it looks like many characters in the novel value love as an equal union in marriage in such a way that economic and social factors are shown to be unimportant. Looking more closely at Mr. Martin and Harriet’s love story, their love for each other is shown to be genuine however economic and social factors have had a great influence on their marital decision. Like Emma acknowledges, “Harriet had always liked Robert Martin: and that his continuing to love her had been irresistible” (770). Harriet does in the end accept Mr. Martin and it looks like it is love that united them as equals despite their status. However, what is revealed towards the end of the novel is that Harriet is a daughter of a tradesman; she did not have the status that Emma had presumed (894), in fact Mr. Martin is a very good economic and social match for her. Thus, the narrative reinforces the fact that love alone is not enough for a truly good match.
Furthermore, Frank Churchill and Miss Fairfax also reveal how love on an equal basis hides Miss Fairfax’s oppression. As a woman without wealth she has no other option but to marry or else find work as a governess (171). One can suggest that Miss Fairfax accepted Mr. Churchill’s offer of marriage because she knew the consequences if she did otherwise. Mr. Churchill and Miss Fairfax have had misunderstandings between them (634) and he had given an appearance of being interested in Emma. Miss Fairfax naturally had lost hope and secretly made plans to become a governess, and when Mr. Churchill found out he made an offer of marriage (634). Miss Fairfax accepted his offer and the narrative indicates that Miss Fairfax and Mr. Churchill love each other equally, however Miss Fairfax’s two options reveal that it is not as simple as that. The narrator also states that after her engagement, Jane Fairfax had quitted her governess position at Highbury and “was restored to the comforts of her beloved home with the Campbells” (772). This illustrate that marriage to Mr. Churchill meant that she would continue living as she had been brought up. Miss Fairfax has a lower economic and social status than Mr. Churchill but in marriage they are united as equals. Love is suggested to have equalized them, however this in turn justifies her unequal position as a woman. Miss Fairfax has only one option to choose if she wants to continue living her life as a genteel woman and that is to accept Mr. Churchill’s offer.

Lastly, Emma and Mr. Knightley’s love can also be seen to work to hide and justify the oppressive structure of marriage. Emma who has the option not to marry and still live well marries because of love. This love as suggested earlier is on an equal basis; however, even though they see themselves as equals, Emma’s choice to marry limits her ability to speak for herself or her option take on work. In a marriage, Mr. Knightley is in charge and she is to fulfil her duty as a wife and potentially a mother. Love provides a good reason for them marrying, but in fact it hides the unequal role Emma will be given in her marriage.

It is evident that an effective marital match is promoted on multiple levels in Austen’s *Emma*. At first glance, it might seem that the couples are blinded by economic and social factors but that it changes towards the end when love as equals is what unites them. However, even though the narrative indicates that the couples see themselves as equals in marriage, this love distracts the reader from and justifies the fact that marriage itself is an oppressive structure and women are not equal to men.
The Powerful Man in *Pride and Prejudice*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, women’s oppression is shown through the female characters’ weak economic and social situation and their need to be saved by a marriage to a rich husband. Their economic and social situation reinforces the social construct that makes men the stronger sex. In *Gender, Change, and Society: French Feminism: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory* by Gill Allwood, masculinity and femininity are described as social constructs “which are responsible for women’s oppression and male power” (81). The social construct of masculinity which suggest that the male sex is more powerful than the female is reinforced by males having more social and economic advantages in society. Love on the other hand, reduces the power difference and distracts the readers from the fact that that women are economically and socially oppressed.

Economic aspects are in focus in *Pride and Prejudice* when it comes to making marital decisions and men’s dominion in the economic area is revealed. This is seen in Mr. Wickham’s behavior, who is an example of a man hunting after a woman of fortune. He shows an interest in many women but is only ready to make a commitment to a woman with a good economic position. The main character Elizabeth is evidently quite taken by his charm but realizes that he does not want her due to her lack of fortune. She concludes that “she would have been his only choice, had fortune permitted it” (Austen 255). Similarly, Mr. Wickham's attention towards Miss Darcy also seem to be driven by material want, this is explained by Mr. Darcy when he tells Elizabeth that Mr. Wickham stopped having an interest in his sister when he found out that he would not be able to have any of her inheritance: “‘Mr. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune’” (342). In the end, Mr. Wickham marries Lydia but only after being paid by Mr. Darcy. He had no intention of marrying Lydia when he ran away with her, it seemed that he was not serious with Lydia and aimed to find another more suitable match in terms of fortune: “Wickham still cherished the hope of more effectually making his fortune by marriage in some other country” (536). However, Mr. Darcy manages to persuade him by offering him a great fortune which he in the end accepts. Mr. Wickham’s behavior displays how males dominated the economic area and therefore could dominate women.

In addition, the character Mrs. Bennet also reveals through her wedding schemes for her daughters that a man’s financial position determines whether he is a good match in
marriage. This is exemplified when she wants her husband to force their daughter Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins: “‘You must come and make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins, for she vows she will not have him’” (193). Mr. Collins is to inherit the Bennet’s property and Mrs. Bennet knew that if Elizabeth married Mr. Collins this issue would be solved. This illustrates Elizabeth’s weak position compared to Mr. Collins, who is superior to her because of his financial position. In a similar way, Mrs. Bennet’s great admiration of Mr. Bingley also relates to the fact that he has a large fortune. In the beginning, even before she has met Mr. Bingley, she describes him as the perfect man for her daughters due to his fortune: “‘A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!’” (5). Likewise, Mr. Darcy who she at the beginning describes as rude and unpleasant, she describes as “a charming man” when she finds out he wants to marry her daughter (635). Her happiness is in her daughters finding rich husbands, “‘Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted!’” (635). These situations all reveal that men are in dominion because of their financial position compared to women, Mrs. Bennet knows this and therefore only considers the financial aspects when she makes her matches for her daughters.

Moreover, Miss Lucas’s engagement to Mr. Collins reveals that men’s economic position is what partly makes men the powerful sex. Charlotte explains to Elizabeth that the quality she sees in Mr. Collins’s character is that he has a good financial situation: “‘I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.’” (217). Miss Lucas gives the impression to have a rational view of marriage. She has realized that she cannot afford to be a romantic, she marries him for what he can offer her in terms of property and a secure home. In this situation, Mr Collin’s is shown to be superior because of his economic situation.

It is clear that *Pride and Prejudice* has an underlying discussion of the economic aspects in choosing a marital suitor and that the male characters due to their economic situation are portrayed as the ones controlling the situation. The monetary aspects reinforce the social construct of men being powerful by letting them have the economic advantages. In addition, social factors like the different roles assigned to the male and female characters in the novel, also strengthen the idea that that the man is more powerful. For example, Charlotte Lucas discloses how a woman should reveal and exaggerate her feelings for a
man in order to make sure he is interested. She says that Jane has to give Mr. Bingley a lot of attention even if she is not sure of her feelings: “When she is secure of him, there will be more leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses” (36). This reveals how a woman should act and behave in order to make sure she catches a husband. It is the woman’s task to make sure she can secure a marriage and this should guide her behavior. Again this supports the idea that men are the powerful sex and women need to find someone that can provide for them.

Furthermore, Lydia also demonstrates women’s minimized position compared to men. Lydia and Mr. Wickham’s relationship brings worse consequences for her than him. Their running away together only creates obstacles for Lydia’s future and Mr. Wickham rules the situation by choosing whether or not to marry her. This reflects how different a man and a woman’s situation were in these times and how this was assisted by economic and social differences. Thus, the male’s powerful status compared to the female is demonstrated in this novel through Charlotte, who believes women should alter their behavior in order to catch a husband and through Lydia who is “saved” when someone pays her lover to marry her.

Even though economic and social factors are seen to have a great influence on the characters’ marriage choices in this novel, there are also some characters who are influenced by love. This is represented in Mr. Darcy’s willingness to marry Elizabeth despite his dislike of her family and her low fortune. His willingness to overlook those aspects suggests that he values love. For example, he states that he wants Elizabeth despite his better judgement: “In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (321). In addition, he also persuades Mr. Bingley not to marry Jane because he thought she was not in love: “I do not suppose that it would ultimately have prevented the marriage, had it not been seconded by the assurance that I hesitated not in giving, of your sister's indifference” (336). Mr. Darcy had objections to the Bennet family’s behavior and also their lack of fortune, however this was not the reason he stopped Mr. Bingley from proposing to Jane, it was because he did not think she loved him. This indicates that Mr. Darcy values love in a marriage.

Similarly, Mr. Bingley also believes love to be prioritized when finding a marriage partner. Jane tells Elizabeth of Mr. Bingley’s assurance of his love of her: “when he went
to town last November, he really loved me; and nothing but persuasion of me being indifferent would have prevented his coming down again’” (585). Evidently Mr. Bingley was only stopped in pursuing Jane because he thought she did not love him. Mr. Bingley did not want a loveless marriage which shows his respect for and value of Jane.

Thus, it can be suggested that love also has an impact on character’s marriage choices in Pride and Prejudice. Gao in his study of Pride and Prejudice claims that “love is the magical power to alter Elizabeth’s attitude towards Darcy’s second proposal” (386). He states that even though Mr. Darcy had a great fortune and has a high social status, this is not enough to make Elizabeth accept his first proposal because she thinks he is arrogant and she does not love him. However, when he invites Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle to Pemberley and shows that his manner had “remarkably improved and his behavior strikingly been altered,” that is when Elizabeth changes her mind (386). In contrast, Campbell suggests in her study that Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley “illustrate[s] the impact Darcy’s estate has on her falling in love with him” (6). I agree with both Gao and Campbell, and suggest that both property and love affect Elizabeth’s change of heart regarding Mr. Darcy’s proposal. However, I believe Elizabeth values property more than love. The readers though get the impression that it is love that changes her mind about Mr. Darcy, especially after exclaiming this to her father, but the fact remains that she decides upon this after she sees his estate (Austen 632). Love on its own is not what convinces Elizabeth, rather love distracts us from the fact that Elizabeth accepted a great opportunity to secure her future economically and also to gain higher status as the wife of Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth knew that to accept Mr. Darcy’s proposal was a chance to achieve those prospects.

Love can also be argued to hide the reasons for the woman’s social position as the weaker sex. One example of this is when Jane is punished for not showing any signs of affection towards Mr. Bingley. Jane’s hesitation leads to Mr. Bingley being persuaded by his sister and Mr. Darcy that she does not love him. Jane is obviously not clear with her feelings because she does not know what she feels and this is what Mr. Darcy has observed. Elizabeth explains this to Charlotte in their conversation about Jane’s reserved feelings: “‘As yet, she cannot even be certain of the degree of her own regard nor of its reasonableness. She has known him only a fortnight’” (64). Jane appears to be in love with Mr. Bingley in the end when she accepts his proposal, but due to his absence she cannot
know him better than she did before he left. Perhaps, Jane decides to accept his proposal despite her concerns and unclear feelings. Possibly Jane accepts Mr. Bingley in order to secure her future. Love is what the narrative suggests united Jane and Mr. Bingley, however this love justifies the men’s powerful status in comparison to women. Men’s economic and social dominion and women’s minimized role in society is justified by love.

I have argued that the characters’ search for an effective match in marriage comes down to the economic and social areas in which the male characters in this novel dominate. The man’s dominion in these areas works to support the social construct of males being powerful, which in turn oppresses women. The narrative suggests that love united Elizabeth with Mr. Darcy and Jane with Mr. Bingley, however love only works to cover the truth about women’s oppressed situation.

Heterosexual Gender Norms in *Northanger Abbey*

In *Northanger Abbey*, the influence of economics and the heterosexual gender norms upon marriage are camouflaged by love.

The economic factor is a key issue when the characters discuss marriage. The main character Catherine Morland presents an example of how a woman’s presumed economic status determined her value as a marital match. In the beginning of the novel, Catherine is believed to be very wealthy and is therefore considered a suitable candidate by General Tilney for his son. This is evident in the conversation Catherine has with her brother’s friend Mr. Thorpe, who says: “‘Yes, by heavens the general thinks you the finest girl in Bath’” (137). The General has heard from Mr. Thorpe that Catherine is very wealthy and this makes her an excellent candidate for his son. It is also why he encourages his son’s continued acquaintance with Catherine by inviting her to their home, Northanger Abbey (204). Likewise, Catherine’s value as financially sound marital match is reduced when he finds out that she is not as wealthy as he had thought. On her visit to Northanger Abbey she is sent out of his house when General Tilney finds out she is not going to inherit anything, that Mr. Thorpe had misunderstood her situation. The narrator notes, “The General had nothing to accuse her of, nothing to lay to her charge…she was guilty of being less rich than he had supposed her to be” (179). This shows that Catherine’s only worth as a marital match was due to her economic position and not her character.
In addition, Mr. Thorpe’s love for Catherine is also an example of how Catherine is considered a suitable match in marriage due to her economic position. Mr. Thorpe’s behavior suggests that he is interested in Catherine because of her wealthy uncle whom he presumes will add to her income. This is shown when he asks about her Uncle Allen: “‘Old Allen is as rich as a Jew—is not he?’” (84). Mr. Thorpe assumes that because Uncle Allen has no children of his own Catherine is to inherit. He is only interested because of her wealth and this is seen when he loses interest when he realizes that Catherine and her family have no fortune (367).

Furthermore, Isabella Thorpe’s love for Catherine’s brother James turns out also be due to his presumed economic position. Isabella tells Catherine how much she is in love with James and that she is not influenced by his economic position: “‘Had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice’” (176). Isabella solemnly declares that her love for James is independent of his economic position, however at the time she believes him to have a great fortune. When she later discovers his financial status is different from what she had expected she is clearly disappointed and starts a new love affair with Captain Tilney.

Thus, it is clear that many of the characters in *Northanger Abbey* are aware of the economic factors when thinking of marriage choices. Hume claims that the novel “bluntly asks a simple question: how much fortune does a woman need to be marriageable?” (294). Similar to *Emma*, the realistic setting of *Northanger Abbey* also reflects the culture of the middle and upper classes of the early 19th century. The General’s perspective, that Catherine’s economic situation was not up to his satisfaction, might correspond to what many families in these times were considering (Gillis 135). For many families in reality, the novel’s central location of Bath secured a safe place for courtship as wealthy and appropriate marital suitors gathered there and so unsuitable matches could be prevented (Gillis 136). Hence, the General’s fury when Catherine turns out to be poor was not unreasonable in these times. Thorpe’s and Isabella’s hunt for an appropriate economic match may look foolish in the novel; however, as they did not come from a wealthy family themselves it was not unreasonable.

Thus, *Northanger Abbey* emphasizes how a suitable economic marital match applies to both males and females, but the novel also shows how social issues like the expectations of both sexes affect the characters. Rosemary Hennessey, in *Profit and Pleasure* describes
how historically males and females have had different roles in marriage which are upheld by heterosexual gender norms. She states that “to be a wife under private patriarchy is to spend blocks of time in the household preparing food, cleaning, caring, counselling, repairing” (64). These heterogender norms can be seen in *Northanger Abbey* and one example of this is in the conversation which Mr. Tilney and Catherine have about similarities between marriage and dancing. Catherine claims that although dancing and marriage can be compared, the duties are very different. Mr. Tilney agrees and explains the roles men and women have in marriage: “In marriage, the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman, the woman to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey, and she is to smile” (107). This passage illustrates Mr. Tilney’s view of the male and female roles, that he upheld these heterosexual gender norms that a patriarchal marriage involves. Women are to fulfill the expectations of their sex and to have these personal qualities which reflect on them being happy and taking care of the home.

In a similar way, Catherine illustrates these heterosexual gender norms in her opinion that she cannot fall in love with Mr. Tilney before he has declared his love. This is shown when she reflects upon her daydreaming about Mr. Tilney: “no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her.” (29). Her sense that it is improper for her to dream about a man before he has declared his love for her shows how the male’s role is more dominant than that of the female, he is the decision maker who in this case should decide whether Catherine is a good match whilst the woman should wait for confirmation.

The conversation Mr. Tilney and Catherine have about women taking an interest in flowers demonstrates the heterosexual gender norm of a woman having a more nurturing and caring character. Mr. Tilney says to Catherine that “a taste for flowers is always desirable in your sex, as a means of getting you out of doors, and tempting you to more frequent exercise than you would otherwise take.” (257). Mr. Tilney reflects on the fact that a taste in flowers is something feminine and therefore is a desirable quality for Catherine to attain. He also adds that it will increase Catherine’s possibility to get out of the house sometimes, which suggests that Mr. Tilney had not expected Catherine to do anything else when they were married but to take care of house and family.
In addition, Catherine’s mother also describes the expectations of Catherine in a marriage due to her female sex. Hennessy states that “the heteronormative marriage arrangements of private patriarchy secured the bourgeois wife as a domestic worker whose labor, while not directly appropriated by the capitalist in exchange for a wage, was nonetheless essential for reproducing the physical well-being, health, and know-how of the workforce, and it did so through naturalized and racialized ideals of bourgeois womanhood (65). A woman was supposed to live up to the expectations of being a domestic worker in order to support the wellbeing of men who were the workers. This was seen as an essential task and therefore can explain Catherine’s mothers concern when it becomes clear that Mr. Tilney and Catherine are to marry: “‘Catherine would make a sad, heedless young housekeeper to be sure,’ was her mother’s foreboding remark; but quick was the consolation of there being nothing like practice’” (Austen 371). Catherine’s mother is worried about how Catherine will handle her domestic role in her forthcoming marriage, obviously as this role was seen as important, but she concludes that Catherine will be able to fulfill her role with a little practice. Again, this shows how women were expected to take on a domestic role when entering into a marriage.

The evident focus on social issues such as the difference between the expectation of male and female roles in the text reflects the society of the beginning of the 19th century. The novel shows how clearly outlined the models of masculinity and femininity were and how these affected marriage choices. As discussed above, social factors together with economic factors influenced marriage choices, what remains to be discussed is how love also is revealed to be the reason for marriage choices in *Northanger Abbey*.

Catherine believes marriage should be based not only on money but also affection. She describes in a conversation with Mr. Thorpe that fortune-based marriages are foolish and that they should be based on other factors as well. He says: “‘Let me only have the girl I like, say I, with a comfortable house over my head, and what care I for all the rest?.’” and her reply is “‘Very true. I think like you there’” (340). Catherine does not believe that money alone is what should determine a marriage and she is convinced of this even before she meets Mr. Tilney. Furthermore, Catherine’s belief in affection within a marriage is also shown in how she handles Isabella’s brother, Mr. Thorpe. He tries to woo her but she is not tempted and is only nice to him due to the fact he is a friend of her brother (108). Even when he proposes to her and Catherine has not yet got an offer from Mr. Tilney she is not
at all tempted to accept him. She tells Isabella that: “‘I certainly cannot return his affection, and as certainly never meant to encourage it’” (213). This shows that Catherine considers affection to be important in a marriage and that she is taking a chance for love in waiting for a proposal by Mr. Tilney.

Similarly, Mr. Tilney also values affection when it comes to marriage choices. It is apparent that he likes Catherine when he says that he “felt himself bound as much in honor as in affection to Miss Morland” (370). That there are no other reasons than affection for him wanting Catherine can be seen when he even goes against his father’s wishes by proposing to her without his consent (372). Mr. Tilney is convinced that he wants Catherine despite what his father thinks: “believing that heart to be his own which he had been directed to gain, no unworthy retraction of a tacit consent, no reversing decree of unjustifiable anger, could shake his fidelity, or influence the resolutions it prompted” (370). Hence, it seems that Mr. Tilney wants to marry Catherine for other reasons than economic ones.

Throughout the novel there is an underlying discussion about economic status, women and men’s social roles and about love in relation to marriage. The novel ends with Catherine and Mr. Tilney finally getting the permission of the General to marry (375) which suggests that their love survived the economic challenges. Even though they marry, one can argue that love is not an isolated reason for their marriage but that it supports a social structure built on heterogender norms and that it hides the involvement of the economic and social factors.

Mr. Tilney and Catherine are aware of the economic factors of their union. Even though Mr. Tilney proposes to Catherine without his father’s consent, they do not marry until they get his permission. It is clear that they cannot marry if the General does not approve because of lack of economic provision. This shows how much economic factors actually influenced marital decisions, and even though it seems like they are in love they would not have been able to marry for only that. At a first glance, it looks like love is the cause of Catherine and Mr. Tilney’s marriage but closer inspection shows that the financial aspect is the most dominant factor. Love only distracts the readers from the fact that the social structure of marriage is based on economic reasons and that love in itself is not enough of a reason to marry.
Similarly, the truth about the heterogender norms that influence the social role of women could be suggested to be camouflaged by love. Love lifts the focus off the unjust structure of marriage and how women are expected to behave. As discussed earlier, the novel illustrates how Mr. Tilney and Catherine reflect on the male and female roles in marriage, and how in fact a woman should act and be. However, suggesting in the end that they are marrying for love justifies the fact that these norms exist. Love also hides the fact that these norms helps to support the capitalist system by making sure women take the responsibility for house and family whilst men are working. Thus, in this novel, woman’s oppression is maintained due to the heteronormative norms that marriage involves but this is justified by love.

Conclusion

In my literature analysis, I have concluded that the novels present three factors that are important for the characters when finding a marital suitor. The factors are economics, politics and love and it is clear they work together to promote an ideal suitor.

In my study I have seen that love alone is not the only reason for the marriage choices made in Austen’s novels and this has also been discussed in previous studies. For example, Campbell concludes that Austen’s main characters often make good economic as well as emotional matches. In a similar way, Gao concludes that Austen’s characters make their matches dependent on multiple factors like economy and love. Finally, Hume concludes that Austen explain the social position women occupied in the beginning of the 19th century and therefore various factors like money are relevant in her character’s matches (Hume 293).

Similar to previous studies, I have concluded that marital matches are made from a multiple perspective. The novels all illustrate characters’ in a search for a suitable match in terms of economic factors. Also, they all depict how social factors influence marriage choices, which is seen in how the texts present a different role for men and women. Further, love is also understood to have an impact on the characters’ marriage choices which is realized particularly at the end when all the characters marry their love.

However, in different ways, the novels illustrate how love can work to divert the reader’s attention from the oppression of women. In Emma, love emotionally equalizes the characters’ in marriage however in doing so it validates the unequal position women have
in society. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the male characters’ dominion in the economic and social area reinforces the social construct of the male sex being more powerful. Love however justifies this male dominion and distracts the readers from the reality of women having a lower status than men. Finally, in *Northanger Abbey*, the characters’ love for each other hides the fact that heteronormative roles are involved in marriage.

Thus, I conclude that love alone does not determine a good marital match in the novels I have looked at, economic and social factors are the deciding factors and love works in the novels to conceal the truth about women’s marginalized role in society.

Works cited


