

What Jane Austen Can Teach Us About Sexual Harassment

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet has to refuse the advances of a powerful man.

By Paula Marantz Cohen Jan. 1, 2018 11:09 a.m. ET

If you're struggling to make sense of the sexual-harassment issues swirling around us, you could do worse than read Jane Austen. I was struck by this recently while teaching what she called her "rather too light and bright and sparkling" novel, "Pride and Prejudice."

Consider the portion of the novel in which Elizabeth Bennet is proposed to by the egregiously foolish and self-important Mr. Collins. A refresher: Elizabeth is one of five sisters living on a small estate, which, in accordance with English law of the period, was "entailed" through the male line. This means when her father dies, his property will pass to his closest male relative, leaving Elizabeth, her sisters and their mother (should Mrs. Bennet survive her husband) homeless.

Mr. Collins is the distant cousin to whom the Bennet estate is entailed, and he assumes that Elizabeth will accept his proposal based on her vulnerable position. He further assumes that she will be grateful for his "condescension." When she says no, he explains to her why: "I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females."

The scene caricatures a familiar dynamic in recent news: A powerful man believes that a vulnerable woman will succumb to him. He equates his power with attractiveness and confuses her resistance with playful seductiveness.

The heroine's response is an example of clarity and decisiveness: "I am very sensible of the honor of your proposals," pronounces Elizabeth, "but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them." Her refusal might serve as a guide to women on how to answer an unwanted proposition: politely but firmly. In some cases, harassment can be stopped by a forceful "no" or a decisive pushing away of a hand.

But it is also true that some men do not take the hint—or are even incited by the resistance, as Mr. Collins initially appears to be. Again, the novel is a helpful guide to next steps. When Mr. Collins suspects, based on something Mrs. Bennet says, that Elizabeth is "a very headstrong foolish girl," he immediately pulls back. It is one thing to have one's way with a pliant woman, something else to contend with a difficult one. Figuring out how to relay to someone in power that you have the capacity to make his life miserable may be an effective way to stop him in his tracks.

To be sure, Elizabeth Bennet's triumph happens within a work of fiction. If we compare Elizabeth with her creator, we see a salient difference. Jane Austen and her sister, Cassandra, had brothers with whom they could live after their father died; Elizabeth had only sisters. As my students noted, in real life she might have been obliged to accept Mr. Collins or end up as a governess where the abuse might have been worse. In marrying, she would at least have her own establishment. That is the rationale of her friend Charlotte Lucas, who accepts Mr. Collins' subsequent proposal.

We must therefore note that Elizabeth Bennet's success is a function of her creator's will to shape her destiny in a positive manner. Austen provides her with Mr. Darcy, a supremely worthy partner, who alleviates the possibility that she will be left with nothing. (Spoiler)

Moving back and forth between fiction and real life, one realizes that Jane Austen is showing us the ideal scenario while urging us to imagine the reality likely to alter it. If one had sisters and no brothers, living in a home entailed to a distant male relation like Mr. Collins, what would be the responsible route to take? Would Elizabeth be right under such circumstances to refuse a distasteful proposal, when not only her future but that of her sisters might be at issue? Mrs. Bennet's fixation on marrying her daughters, generally ridiculed by readers, makes sense in the grim context.

Some final lessons derive from this: One can sometimes know what is the right thing to do but not be able to do it. Thus we ought not to judge others harshly when circumstances curtail their ability to act freely. That said, even Jane Austen, writing more than 200 years ago, knew what the right behavior looked like in the face of a harasser. Elizabeth was decisive and clear in rejecting Mr. Collins. Austen represented this in her fictional world; in 2018, we should hope to be able to imitate it in our real one.

Ms. Cohen is a professor of English at Drexel University, where she is dean of the Pennoni Honors College.

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