

## **politics and humanities ep 3**

[00:00:00.06] TOM MERRILL: Hello. This is Politics and the Humanities, a podcast from American University. I'm Tom Merrill. I'm here with Sarah Marsh, my colleague from the Department of Literature. We are going to be discussing Pride and Prejudice and the problem of self-knowledge and self-deception today.

[00:00:17.19] Before I get started, I should say that if you want to comment or if you have a reaction, please send it to us at PoliticsAndTheHumanities-- in one word-- @gmail.com. And we'd love to get your responses and hear what you think. And if you ask us question, we'll try to respond to it on a future episode. But we're here to talk about Pride and Prejudice and Jane Austen.

[00:00:41.67] Sarah, you teach this book. Is that right?

[00:00:44.46] SARAH MARSH: I do. I teach it every year. I think I've probably read it every year since I was in graduate school. And I have a lot of ideas about this book and delighted to get to talk with you about it today.

[00:01:02.29] TOM MERRILL: So I confess that I have never taught this book. I think I read it once back when I was in college. And I thought that it was a soap opera and never returned to it. So I think your first job is, coming from a part of the science world, this looks like a lot of mere interpersonal interactions, I guess you might say.

[00:01:25.77] SARAH MARSH: Mm-hmm.

[00:01:26.19] TOM MERRILL: So am I wrong about that?

[00:01:28.74] SARAH MARSH: Just a little. So that's a dominant view. That was a reading of Austen that held sway for a very long time. And when I teach this book, we talk about that a lot-- the idea that folks who have read Pride and Prejudice or seen any of the film adaptations are taught by the popular culture to understand Austen as chick lit or as a great romance. And I think there's plenty of material in the books to support those kinds of readings.

[00:02:00.31] But I also tell them that Austen was a savvy observer of social and political relationships. And one of the things that we try to do in the classes I teach is to sort of put those ideas together and to think about the ways Austen is a political thinker and is afforded really interesting opportunities by the novel to explore contemporary politics in Britain.

[00:02:32.43] TOM MERRILL: So you think that she's taking sort of a pre-existing form or maybe a form that came to be after she was writing, but sort of the romantic novel, and doing something more with it than simply entertainment or escapism.

[00:02:47.53] SARAH MARSH: I think that's right. And she is really interested in the political economy of marriage and in what that means for these groups of families that she studies so closely in her fiction. And when I teach Pride and Prejudice, the two terms that I always teach

my students are, first, the idea of primogeniture, which is the idea in early modern Britain and before that property, landed property, passed intact from father to oldest son. And that's how you keep these big landed estates together.

[00:03:33.18] And then the other term I teach my students is something called coverture, which is an old Roman law which basically said that a woman's legal personhood was covered by her father until her marriage. And then her personhood, legally, was subsumed under the legal personhood of her husband.

[00:03:57.41] TOM MERRILL: So this is the scenario, as it were, before feminism, before--

[00:04:03.56] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:04:04.53] TOM MERRILL: And whichever kind of variety of feminism we're talking about, before even liberal feminism.

[00:04:09.36] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And this, in large part, was what the early feminists were reacting against. So someone like Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote a lot about the education system in Britain and was thinking about how women were oppressed by different education systems, was writing essentially out of this same society that Austen is writing about. Wollstonecraft is a little bit older than Austen, but she's writing out of the same frame.

[00:04:41.79] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I know some of the students in the roots of political economy class are reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who's about a century later, but who's very much about how the economic substructure of marriage really distorts human life, and obviously for women, but also in some ways for men.

[00:04:58.86] SARAH MARSH: Right. And I think that that's a nice angle to think through and one that I really encourage my students to consider-- is that this is a system that creates all sorts of difficulties for women while it also creates all sorts of difficulties for men and all sorts of obstacles to self-knowledge. And I think, in large part, that's what *Pride and Prejudice* is helping us to think through.

[00:05:30.59] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I mean, I guess as I read the novel, it's easy to get wrapped up in what you might call the soap opera dimension of it, because it is so entertaining. And it's fun. And there are surprises. But the picture that she's showing us-- and one shouldn't assume that simply because she's writing about this that she's endorsing the institutions that she's portraying-- in fact, quite the contrary, that the deeper message might be, well, human lives are messed up in these particular ways because of these institutions.

[00:06:02.66] SARAH MARSH: Well, and that's the thing. Right? The crisis that kicks off the novel is that the Bennets don't have a son. That is the whole rising action. There would be no *Pride and Prejudice* if the Bennets had a boy. And that, I think, is why the novel is this really useful tool that Austen uses to really excavate these family relationships in relationship to these big legal institutions. And she's really using the book to mediate, how do our social relationships work when we've got these big systems that are in large part completely out of our hands?

[00:06:46.40] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Darn it, if we could only pick the gender of our children or control which children were able to be born, then we wouldn't have any of these problems. Right?

[00:06:56.12] SARAH MARSH: That's right. That's right.

[00:06:57.86] TOM MERRILL: It's the old thing in Plato's Republic, right, that you can't really control the city until you can control-- until you have some kind of eugenics system.

[00:07:05.57] SARAH MARSH: Right. And Austen cannot control the way wealth is organized in her society without exactly what you say or changes to the law that are way beyond the end of her own life.

[00:07:27.13] TOM MERRILL: Right. So let me make sure that I understand the basic scope of the story. And then I have some things I want to ask you about, just having reread this for the first time in a while. It looks to me like there are three basic episodes in this book.

[00:07:41.57] SARAH MARSH: Uh-huh.

[00:07:42.66] TOM MERRILL: And I guess some additions have three different volumes. But mine didn't have the volumes, so I had to try to figure things out for myself. But the main character, Elizabeth, gets proposed to three times in this book.

[00:07:56.21] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:07:57.91] TOM MERRILL: And you can sort of see each episode as having one of those proposals as its central event.

[00:08:06.76] SARAH MARSH: Uh-huh.

[00:08:07.52] TOM MERRILL: Right? So the first one is this character Mr. Collins, who is a reverend, a minister.

[00:08:14.24] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:08:14.66] TOM MERRILL: Correct? And also the heir to the Bennet fortune--

[00:08:18.05] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:08:18.95] TOM MERRILL: --which is convenient. She rejects him. And then, in the second episode, Mr. Darcy, who, of course, is the male lead of this, proposes to her. She rejects him.

[00:08:30.17] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:08:31.43] TOM MERRILL: And then, eventually, with a lot of things happening along the way, in the third section, he proposes again. And she accepts it. That's the basic structure of the story.

[00:08:40.18] SARAH MARSH: Mm-hmm. That's the big arc.

[00:08:41.93] TOM MERRILL: That's the big arc. And so a full interpretation, you have to try to think through, why does she accept or not accept? What has she learned about herself? What has she learned about the world as she's going through that?

[00:08:56.79] And maybe we should talk especially about the Mr. Collins proposal, because it's so deliciously horrible.

[00:09:03.67] SARAH MARSH: Yes. There's an article that I ask my students to read whenever we consider this part of the book. And it's by a scholar named Ruth Perry. And the title is "Sleeping with Mr. Collins." And it--

[00:09:22.08] TOM MERRILL: [LAUGHS]

[00:09:23.64] SARAH MARSH: It's entirely--

[00:09:24.14] TOM MERRILL: That doesn't sound like fun. Sorry.

[00:09:25.60] SARAH MARSH: It's entirely cringe-worthy. Everybody sort of groans when I tell them the title of this article that I'm going to ask them to read.

[00:09:34.97] TOM MERRILL: That's the point of a good title, right? Is to--

[00:09:36.98] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:09:37.97] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:09:38.54] SARAH MARSH: That's right. So yeah, let's talk about Mr. Collins.

[00:09:43.88] TOM MERRILL: Well, before we go before we that, can we-- so one thing that I'm just struck by as I read this is the concept of writing by subtext.

[00:09:52.87] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:09:55.36] TOM MERRILL: You know, during the pandemic, my children and I have been watching this TV show, The Office, that you probably know from many years ago. And there's always a scene in which the main character, Michael Scott, is giving-- in almost every episode, there's a scene in which the main character is kind of yakking on and giving some completely ridiculous speech. And there's always some other character who looks straight at the camera. And there's sort of a moment of intimacy between the character and the viewer that, you know, boy, isn't this ridiculous. Right?

[00:10:28.79] And I feel like Austen does that without quite having a character who's going to look straight at the camera. She says things, and if you read it quickly, it seems to mean one thing. But if you read it slowly, you start to realize that she's being sarcastic or that she undercuts it immediately, and that there's a subtext that is closer to what she really thinks about the thing that you have to do some thinking in order to get to.

[00:10:54.51] And it occurred to me-- if you could go through and, as it were, highlight the subtext, make the subtext the text, you might actually come up with a quite different impression of the book--

[00:11:05.41] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:11:06.83] TOM MERRILL: --than you would if you just thought that it were just another soap opera. And so I thought-- would you help me? I want to have some thoughts about the opening lines of the book?

[00:11:18.40] SARAH MARSH: Oh, yeah. Let's do it.

[00:11:20.11] TOM MERRILL: Would you mind reading?

[00:11:21.94] SARAH MARSH: Not at all. OK. Here it is. Volume 1, chapter 1. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters."

[00:11:58.99] TOM MERRILL: So on the first sort of go-round, it looks as though you have this heroic male figure striding onto the scene right who is the focus of attention.

[00:12:09.79] SARAH MARSH: Uh-huh.

[00:12:10.38] TOM MERRILL: And it seems to be somehow an assertion of-- there is an assertion of universality, that this is sort of the paradigm story in human life, is that the male shows up, and he's going to find a wife.

[00:12:27.38] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:12:28.41] TOM MERRILL: Who do you think is speaking in that first line?

[00:12:33.33] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. So the analogy to *The Office* is so smart. Tell your kids how brilliant they are at Austen scholarship, because the camera work is the way the narrator works in what Austen is doing here. It's a kind of, like, roving eyeball that can zoom in and have intimacy with some characters, even sometimes get inside of their subjectivity.

[00:13:00.79] But I think what we've got here-- like, this is the big-- if we were watching a film or we were watching this on television, this would be the big, wide camera angle. And then it would slowly zoom in to the families that we're about to meet. But

[00:13:17.02] This view, this narrator's framing of the whole novel, is the big scene of the whole human experience, as you said, Tom-- that there's a man, and traditionally, men with fortunes need wives. That's the abstraction. And then everything that follows is the sort of detail that unfolds, the particularity of the problems and what we can accomplish or not through that system.

[00:13:53.12] TOM MERRILL: But I was thinking something slightly different, because-- well, number one, the thing that's so striking about it is how passively it's phrased.

[00:14:02.08] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:14:02.29] TOM MERRILL: It's almost completely anonymous. It's not-- I mean, I was thinking about alternative ways you could have written the sentence. And one of them might be-- because the speaker-- the obvious answer is, the speaker is Jane Austen. And Jane Austen could have said, I have observed that when a man moves into a neighborhood, that all the families around are immediately marrying them off in their minds.

[00:14:25.37] But that would be a different-- that would be a more honest sentence, but it wouldn't say exactly what I think she's trying to say.

[00:14:31.36] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:14:31.93] TOM MERRILL: There's something about the anonymity of "it is a truth universally acknowledged" that strikes me as really important. And then, the other thing that I thought-- you tell me what you think about this-- but we talked about John Stuart Mill and the idea of social tyranny of the majority. I think that's what this is. I think the definition of social tyranny in the majority is, it's a social construction that we have naturalized and that we never think to even question. We think that it's as natural as gravity or, you know, the stars going around the Earth in the night or whatever.

[00:15:07.22] But this is a truth that is a highly contingent truth that has been elevated into what seems to be a law of nature.

[00:15:16.84] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. That's right. And in that sense, the book becomes sort of like a proof or disproof of the general principle that it is a truth universally acknowledged.

[00:15:34.03] TOM MERRILL: Right. And she's going to undercut it in many different ways. Right? And part of the funniness of the line is that it turns out not to be quite true.

[00:15:45.49] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:15:46.25] TOM MERRILL: And even as early as the second line, "however little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood," it's clear that we're not seeing this from the point of view of the man in question.

[00:15:58.87] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:15:59.80] TOM MERRILL: Right? That we're expressing the point of view of the observers of the man in question.

[00:16:05.21] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:16:06.01] TOM MERRILL: And we learn pretty quickly that this is basically the view of Mrs. Bennet. This is sort of the conventional view of-- you know, Heidegger has this phrase in *Being and Time*-- sorry to bring in less attractive things-- but "das man," which people sometimes translate as "the they." And the idea is that there's kind of a conventional wisdom that determines our lives, and we have never reflected on it.

[00:16:32.44] And you say, well, who is the authority for this opinion you have? And all you can say is, well, that's what they say.

[00:16:39.51] SARAH MARSH: That's what they say. Yeah.

[00:16:40.79] TOM MERRILL: Literally, that's what they say. Well, who are these "they?" I don't know.

[00:16:43.92] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:16:46.51] TOM MERRILL: But I think what's really happening here is, this is an expression of the desire of the families and maybe in particular of the women in the families. So it looks like this is a story about this heroic male figure, but the heroic male figure is actually a projection of female desire.

[00:17:06.64] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, and the different forms that that desire takes, because there's the sort of like sexual attraction dimension that we [INAUDIBLE] first when we talk about desire. But Mrs. Bennet has desires in this novel that really direct a lot of the action or part of the comic relief, depending on how you situate her. And she is a really interesting expositor of these sort of socially-held views. Or she's the mouthpiece for them--

[00:17:44.70] TOM MERRILL: Correct. Yes.

[00:17:46.03] SARAH MARSH: --across at least the first two volumes. And then she sort of quiets down after the other voices start to hold more sway in the text.

[00:17:54.01] TOM MERRILL: Well, as Elizabeth begins to assert herself more, on some deep level, there's kind of a struggle between Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth.

[00:18:02.29] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. And the generational break that Austen orchestrates between the older Bennets, Mr. And Mrs. Bennet, who we learn over the course of the novel are not a good model of marriage, and that Mrs. Bennet's daughters have never been able to respect her, and that is it is their father who has exposed their mother to the ridicule or the disdain of the children. There's this weird intergenerational problem that Austen is talking about. And it is-- I think the source of that problem is this collective social knowledge about what it means to be married.

[00:18:49.94] TOM MERRILL: Which, in the long run, is a debilitating social knowledge.

[00:18:54.08] SARAH MARSH: That's right-- that the novel is designed, I think, to transcend.

[00:19:00.26] TOM MERRILL: Right. Just one more point on these first couple of lines. I mean, if what's really being done here is female desire or female eros, which-- you know, Austen is a pretty buttoned-up writer. There are few hints of sexuality in the thing. But it just looks to me like somehow desire has projected this figure of this heroic male who's going to come in.

[00:19:30.11] But the truth is, as in the second line, that it's clear that that male figure is unknown in some important respects. We're not getting any insight into the subjectivity of that person.

[00:19:43.21] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:19:43.91] TOM MERRILL: And so there's a level of-- female agency is actually the thing that's going on here. And that's important to recognize. But there's also a level of lack of self-knowledge or even self-deception, that you've projected your desire into this object that you then fantasize about, even though you're really the one who's somehow doing the work.

[00:20:07.11] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And again, the passive voice or the unclear reference of the second sentence-- "however little known the feelings or views of such a man may be." Now, is that to everybody else? Is that to the man himself? Is that--

[00:20:26.55] TOM MERRILL: Right. He might be gay. Right?

[00:20:30.16] SARAH MARSH: That's right. I mean, there's a lot of ambiguity. And queering Austen is something that critics have done because of the space that's created by the style of the art form.

[00:20:44.34] TOM MERRILL: She's winking at you, and she expects you to pick up on that, because she expects that you are a person of some intelligence.

[00:20:50.57] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:20:52.70] TOM MERRILL: And to be able to recognize the tension between the surface and what's underneath the surface and to be able to see what she's doing with it.

[00:21:02.33] SARAH MARSH: Right. And I think the other thing that she's working on here really, really quickly-- I mean, again, we're in the first two sentences of the whole book-- "that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters." I mean, she's poking right away at the thing everybody knew, which was that women were vessels--

[00:21:28.10] TOM MERRILL: Property.

[00:21:29.51] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. They were themselves property. Right? You know, men held property interests-- not saleable ones-- but they held property interests in the sexual bodies of their wives and of their daughters. And so this is a direct turnabout on that idea that, again, suggests a level of self-deception about the system in which this particular idea circulates.

[00:21:59.90] TOM MERRILL: And now we're getting a lot out of these two lines, but you could say that, at least in imagination, they're doing to this mysterious male figure or what, in a sense, has been done to them.

[00:22:10.83] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:22:12.03] TOM MERRILL: And so, in a way, the structures of inequality-- psychic structures of inequality-- are reproducing themselves.

[00:22:19.43] SARAH MARSH: That's right, as the pretext to this opening dialogue. Right? You get this sort of, like, articulation of universal truths-- wink, wink-- that are not so truth-y, and then right into the quoted speech of the things that are being said. I think part of the usefulness of teaching this book as a great text of the liberal arts tradition is because it helps us tease out the way that individuals work inside of these super-structures.

[00:23:08.13] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. And I would also just say-- and this is the hardest thing to teach when you're trying to read a book with students-- is the ability to see multiple layers at the same time or to see an image as an image.

[00:23:24.21] I think we're about to tape an episode on Aristophanes' Clouds, which is obscene and funny. And I just remember I had a student one time look at me after we started the discussion and said, is this going to be on the quiz? It's like, it's a joke. You're supposed to laugh. But you're also supposed to somehow connected to some larger thing. It's revealing something about the human condition.

[00:23:50.28] But to me, the deep theme of this book is the way that we deceive ourselves.

[00:23:54.93] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:23:55.66] TOM MERRILL: And you see it at work right off the bat in these first couple of lines. And I think that is connected with the comic aspect.

[00:24:04.71] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:24:05.85] TOM MERRILL: Comedy is funny when we see somebody who thinks they're doing one thing. That's why Michael Scott is so funny, is because he thinks he lives in a world of what he's imagined. And everyone else can see you're a fool. You're about to slip on the banana peel.

[00:24:20.72] SARAH MARSH: Right. And that's what Mr. Bennet says, I think, toward the end of the book. He says, what do we live for but to make sport for our neighbors and laugh at them in our turn? And this sort of-- this is part of the human comedy, that we all take our role, for better or for worse, as Michael Scott. Maybe we're not all Michael Scott.

[00:24:46.89] TOM MERRILL: Well, my children inform me that I'm the Michael Scott of our household. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about that.

[00:24:53.73] [LAUGHTER]

[00:24:57.51] SARAH MARSH: Like I said, it sounds like you have some Austen scholars on your hands.

[00:25:00.78] TOM MERRILL: [LAUGHS] So shall we-- I can tell you that my daughter, who's now 12, read this, I think, last year and was revolted at the idea that anyone was going to make her get married to anybody. So several days of protest, which I guess is to be expected. Should we talk about Mr. Collins, speaking of comic figures?

[00:25:25.53] SARAH MARSH: Speaking of the Michael Scotts of the world.

[00:25:29.22] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. How would you describe-- we need to set it up a little bit. How would you describe Mr. Collins?

[00:25:35.28] SARAH MARSH: So it's really hard for me to imagine Mr. Collins without thinking of David Bamber's portrayal of him in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice*. So I sort of think of a diminutive figure who's sort of always bowing and undertaking these rituals of deference. And it's interesting though. In the book, he is described as being a tall, well-formed figure. So he is not the sycophant that David Bamber portrays in what I think is a well-known film.

[00:26:15.00] So that struck me this time through to think about the ways that even Mr. Collins might cut some kind of a figure, at least physically. And then he opens his mouth and gives the lie to every other impression.

[00:26:33.58] TOM MERRILL: We have to also just note-- he's the heir to Mr. Bennet's money.

[00:26:38.88] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:26:39.33] TOM MERRILL: And through some weird legal thing-- I mean, this is sort of the gimmick that makes the whole story work. Through some weird legal thing, Mr. Bennet can't leave his money to his daughters, which you would think would be the just thing and the thing that he would want.

[00:26:54.49] And so Mr. Collins is going to inherit. And he thinks, well, since I'm going to inherit, I might as well marry one of the daughters.

[00:27:00.30] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:27:01.07] TOM MERRILL: So there's already a power differential there.

[00:27:04.83] SARAH MARSH: Absolutely. So again, when I teach this, I nerd out momentarily on the legal history, which is that there are lots of different ways you can own land. But I would say the two big categories are that you can own an estate in fee simple, which gives you power to sell the land, to build things on the land, to say who is going to inherit the land after your death.

[00:27:36.57] Or you can own the land in something called fee tail. And I tell my students, those of you who are going to law school are going to see all these terms again whenever you study property law, because our system comes from the British system.

[00:27:51.00] TOM MERRILL: And that's entail.

[00:27:52.72] SARAH MARSH: And that's the entail. So Mr. Bennet owns his estate in fee tail. And there are some rules about how it can be passed down. Right? And someone like Mr. Darcy owns his estate in fee simple.

[00:28:06.69] And then there are the folks who are renting Netherfield, the Bingleys, who don't own land at all. Their family is in trade. And they're new money. So they're renting. So these are - and Austen's readers would have known all of these cues. So they could have situated all these people in this socioeconomic matrix and understand their motivations based on those categories.

[00:28:34.09] So anyway, the estate at Longbourn will pass to Mr. Collins after Mr. Bennet dies. And one of the really delightful comic lines through the whole book is this banter between Mr. And Mrs. Collins about who's going to die first.

[00:28:54.15] TOM MERRILL: Right. Well, you know, obviously, when you know who the heir is going to be, then the heir has a real interest in the person dying, which is a pretty unpleasant thing that we don't like to talk about.

[00:29:07.29] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:29:08.19] TOM MERRILL: It's always like, he comes over to the house and people think that he's measuring the window for the curtains.

[00:29:13.47] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. For the curtains. [LAUGHS]

[00:29:17.81] TOM MERRILL: And the other thing that strikes me-- and we should just get into the text-- but Mr. Collins is a clergyman. He's the representative of the church in the book. And, as we learn in the quote that we're about to read, he's tightly connected with this Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is the example of the real aristocracy, like the landed nobility.

[00:29:41.04] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:29:41.88] TOM MERRILL: And if you think about this politically, what's the political message of Austen's book? I mean, Lady Catherine is pompous and condescending and basically a horrible person. And Collins is somebody who likes kissing up to powerful people.

[00:29:59.43] And so I think the implication is that the nobility is completely self-absorbed and oblivious to everyone else in the world and that the clergy spends its time kissing up to the nobility and telling them how great they are. That's a pretty radical thing to imply, I would think.

[00:30:18.57] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And when we consider that Austen's own father was a clergyman, she had some insight into these dynamics. And Austen's family was by no means part of the aristocracy. This was undoubtedly something she had an opportunity to observe during her own lifetime.

[00:30:39.93] And we see the dichotomy, too. I think it comes out more strongly in Emma, with the character of George Knightley. But there's also the idea that the aristocracy is good for some things. You know, we have a Darcy, who is-- we hear over and over again that he is a good steward to the poor and that he takes care of his tenants and his servants.

[00:31:09.99] And I think those two views of the aristocracy are really, really fighting it out with one another in the relationship of Lady Catherine to Darcy in the book, which is another really interesting wrinkle, because, of course, she is his aunt.

[00:31:24.93] TOM MERRILL: Right. Well, shall we read some of Mr. Collins?

[00:31:30.15] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. Tom, why don't you take it from the top of the proposal?

[00:31:35.24] TOM MERRILL: So just to set it up-- so Mr. Collins says, "but before I'm run away--" so he's proposing to her. And he says, "before I'm run away by my feelings on the subject, perhaps it would be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying-- and, moreover, for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife, as I certainly did."

[00:31:54.38] And Jane interjects. "The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away by his feelings made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him further." Right? So Elizabeth is already cracking up at the ridiculousness of this.

[00:32:12.42] SARAH MARSH: Right. And the other piece of what's so funny about this is that Mr. Collins can't leave Hertfordshire, which is where the Bennets live, without someone promising to marry him, because Lady Catherine dispatches him from where he lives at Hunsford. And she's like, go find a wife. I want someone to visit. Go find a wife.

[00:32:36.56] TOM MERRILL: He's following the instructions of the person that he really cares about.

[00:32:40.77] SARAH MARSH: That's right. I mean, that's one of the great love affairs of this book.

[00:32:43.42] TOM MERRILL: That's right. Yeah.

[00:32:44.66] SARAH MARSH: Collins [INAUDIBLE] Catherine is.

[00:32:48.17] TOM MERRILL: Yes. OK. So here's his speech explaining why he wants to get married. "My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances-- like myself-- to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I'm convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly, which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honor of calling patroness. Twice she has condescended to give me her opinion-- unasked, too-- on this subject.

[00:33:24.71] And it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford, between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh's footstool that she said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for my sake; and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. This is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.'

[00:33:58.07] Allow me, by the way, to observe, my fair cousin, that I do not reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will find her manners beyond anything I can describe. And your wit and vivacity, I think, must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite." What does that even mean?

[00:34:24.06] "Thus much for my general intentions in favor of matrimony." Maybe we should just stop right there. I mean, the hilarious thing is that he's proposing to Elizabeth, but he spends fully 75% of what we read so far talking about Lady Catherine. [LAUGHS]

[00:34:40.93] SARAH MARSH: The thing that I hadn't thought about is this interjection about "while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh's footstool--" which is, of course. Mr. Collins. Mr. Collins is the footstool.

[00:34:56.05] TOM MERRILL: Right. But it's also-- it's as though this specific experience interchanged with Lady de Bourgh is so burned into his memory. It's like the first time he's ever thought any of these thoughts.

[00:35:12.75] And also, just the irony of-- I mean, if you said to someone today, why are you getting married, you would think that the second reason, because I think it is going to make me happy, would be the headline. Right? We have a very subjective notion of what marriage is all about.

[00:35:27.26] But he starts off by saying, well, I think it would be good for me to set an example for everybody else. It's like, is somebody paying attention to you that I'm unaware of here?

[00:35:38.93] SARAH MARSH: Right. And I think that the other part of the joke is that he is going to be the example of marriage. Already, he doesn't understand what it's about. And somehow he is going to be the one to model it back home, I think is the other part of the joke.

[00:35:58.74] TOM MERRILL: So one word that I think is important in his speech there-- "twice she has condescended." That word condescended mostly has a negative sense for us, but also could have a positive sense.

[00:36:11.85] SARAH MARSH: For Collins, it does. It's a mark of his visibility to the powerful or the people he presumes to have a certain kind of power. And, in some ways, that's the sum total of his of his motivation. He's busy fulfilling the obligations of the entailment. There's nothing he can do to not inherit Longbourn, even though he already has a place to live.

[00:36:44.49] I mean, when Mr. Bennet dies, Mr. Collins will have two estates. He'll have the living at Hunsford, which is the parish that's associated with Lady Catherine's landed estate. And he'll have Longbourn, which now belongs to the Bennets, which is another really interesting point in this sort of novel with all these people who are not going to have a place to live. We have this one man who has two houses.

[00:37:12.32] TOM MERRILL: And there's no way that he's going to go live in Longbourn, because he's so--

[00:37:15.30] SARAH MARSH: Oh, no.

[00:37:16.08] TOM MERRILL: This is really a love speech to Lady Catherine, not to Elizabeth.

[00:37:20.15] SARAH MARSH: No. He would-- he won't be able to make it. He would have nothing to do if he lived at Longbourn.

[00:37:28.56] TOM MERRILL: And also notice this delightful little detail. He says to Elizabeth, "you will find her manners beyond anything I can describe; and your wit and vivacity, I think, must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. I mean, that's a criticism. Right? He's like, you talk too much.

[00:37:47.10] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:37:47.46] TOM MERRILL: But when you meet Lady Catherine, you're going to be so amazed by how awesome she is that you're going to shut up.

[00:37:52.64] SARAH MARSH: And you will be quiet when you meet her.

[00:37:55.20] TOM MERRILL: And you will be quiet, damn it.

[00:37:57.71] SARAH MARSH: And the other thing-- this is one of those examples of what you were pointing out at the beginning, Tom, of the narrator, or of Austen herself intervening and giving a wink or creating some depth or some double-ness what we're reading. So this line-- "you will find her manners beyond anything I can describe." And that is true. Right? Elizabeth--

[00:38:24.52] TOM MERRILL: That's right. But not in a good way.

[00:38:26.39] SARAH MARSH: But not in the way that he thinks. And that capacity of the language that Austen is choosing is what I think gives the book so much energy. And it's part of the comedy. And it cues you in to the idea that the novel is happening on a lot of different levels all at once.

[00:38:54.02] TOM MERRILL: And it's just pleasurable as a reader to see these things and be able to appreciate them.

[00:39:00.08] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:39:01.85] TOM MERRILL: It's kind of a practice in expanding your imagination. I mean, I remember one point in my life when I was talking to somebody, and I suddenly realized, in order to understand what this person is saying, I have to hear what they're not saying, the things that they're avoiding trying to say. And it was kind of a revelation. Like, I needed to see everything upside down.

[00:39:22.54] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:39:24.42] TOM MERRILL: But maybe all of us speak that way, because it's hard to say the entire truth.

[00:39:30.11] SARAH MARSH: Right. And we only have the words that we're able to say in the time that we've got allotted. And yet there's all the other things.

[00:39:37.90] The other thing that this brings up for me, too, is the pleasure of rereading books. And I think *Pride and Prejudice* is one of those books that people tend to go back to over and over again, because moments like this afford pleasure. Because if you read the first time, we don't know yet that Elizabeth is going to have a very particular kind of relationship with Lady Catherine.

[00:40:02.70] But the second time through, you've got all of that in your mind. And you can see Austen pointing toward it. And I think it speaks to the way that a reading public would have engaged novels during the period of Austen's life, but also an invitation to contemporary readers to re-engage and to go back and read it again, which is not something our reading practices tend to be about these days. It's not like we're-- let me go back and read that BuzzFeed article again.

[00:40:35.49] TOM MERRILL: That's right. Yeah. There's no meditation. There's no sense that there might be more there than you've been able to discern at the moment.

[00:40:44.04] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:40:46.58] TOM MERRILL: Shall we finish or read the climax of the scene?

[00:40:50.82] SARAH MARSH: Please. You want to do the honors?

[00:40:53.17] TOM MERRILL: What's that?

[00:40:53.84] SARAH MARSH: You should do the honors.

[00:40:55.21] TOM MERRILL: OK. So Catherine is-- I'm sorry-- Elizabeth is going to reject him. And this is a big deal, because if she does not get married, then she faces a very difficult fate of poverty. And so this is a really big deal. So she's going to reject him.

[00:41:16.34] She says it once. And like-- can I say this-- like some men who exist in the world, he has a hard time taking no for an answer.

[00:41:25.58] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:41:26.39] TOM MERRILL: Right? So maybe if we just read from the paragraph-- his speech-- "when I do myself the honor." And you want to pick up Elizabeth?

[00:41:37.91] SARAH MARSH: Hang on. Let me find it.

[00:41:39.41] TOM MERRILL: I think the exchange is important.

[00:41:41.33] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. Hang on.

[00:41:46.37] TOM MERRILL: And obviously, for those of you who are listening to this, you get the most out of this if you're able to look at the text.

[00:41:52.66] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. Please do [INAUDIBLE].

[00:41:53.39] TOM MERRILL: Read along at home.

[00:41:55.58] SARAH MARSH: So, Tom, you're going to read from-- tell me again where to start.

[00:41:59.99] TOM MERRILL: "When I do myself the honor of speaking to you next." It's several paragraphs before the end, but it's coming up to the great last exchange.

[00:42:11.07] SARAH MARSH: Yes. I've got it. Go ahead.

[00:42:12.63] TOM MERRILL: OK. "When I do myself the honor of speaking to you next on the subject, I shall hope to receive a more favorable answer than you have now given me; though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present--" the implication is that he will in the future--

"because I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with a true delicacy of the female character."

[00:42:42.28] SARAH MARSH: "Really, Mr. Collins,' cried Elizabeth with some warmth, 'you puzzle me exceedingly. If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one.'"

[00:43:00.76] TOM MERRILL: "You must give me leave to flatter myself," because otherwise I wouldn't do it.

[00:43:06.16] [LAUGHTER]

[00:43:08.72] Sorry. "You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these-- it does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own are circumstances highly in my favor. And you should take it into further consideration, that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to you.

[00:43:48.07] Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females."

[00:44:09.83] SARAH MARSH: "I do assure you, sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again for the honor you have done me and your proposals. But to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart."

[00:44:47.36] TOM MERRILL: It just strikes me that those two speeches, Mr. Collins last speech and Elizabeth's last speech-- and there's a little bit more, but I think this is the key-- are finely matched, that they echo each other.

[00:45:02.09] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:45:02.57] TOM MERRILL: And that he finally reveals that he thinks of women as elegant females who say one thing, but you don't really have to take seriously what they say.

[00:45:14.42] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:45:15.83] TOM MERRILL: Because they're going to say yes eventually anyway.

[00:45:18.26] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:45:19.58] TOM MERRILL: And Elizabeth's conception of a rational creature is speaking the truth from her heart.

[00:45:27.41] SARAH MARSH: Right. And part of the reason that Collins believes that Elizabeth will say yes eventually is because I think that, in some sense, he doesn't understand her to have a meaningful choice. And if we consider the economic circumstances of Elizabeth's life, with this proposal, she could secure the safety of her sisters. They won't have to move out of their home when their father dies.

[00:45:52.37] You know, Elizabeth is staking a big claim in herself. And in doing so, she's casting into the breach her sisters, at least one of whom she loves very dearly. And so this idea that Collins has that Elizabeth has got to say yes is a sexist calculation and also is founded in the political economy that Elizabeth live her life end and that she decides to assert her rationality in the face of those old feudal systems of land inheritance.

[00:46:35.87] Show us a heroine who is breaking from her tribe to be an individual.

[00:46:42.26] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. So I want to talk about that and the rationality. The thing that strikes me-- is his presumption simply a matter of the political economy, that financially you'd have to be a fool to turn down this offer? But there's also just a deeper sense that females don't really make choices.

[00:47:03.44] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:47:06.95] TOM MERRILL: You don't have to listen seriously to what they say.

[00:47:09.62] SARAH MARSH: That's right. Unless they're Lady Catherine.

[00:47:11.60] TOM MERRILL: Unless they're Lady Catherine. Right.

[00:47:13.50] SARAH MARSH: And the other thing that's so telling about the scene is that Collins persists in this idea that not only is Elizabeth going to come around, but that if she doesn't, her parents will force her to. And that's the calculation that Austen undercuts with Mr. Bennet's character, who tells Elizabeth on the back end of this, your mother may want you to marry Mr. Collins, which she of course does, but if you marry him, I will never see you again, even if your mother says the opposite.

[00:47:51.00] And I'm not doing justice to the humor of the scene. And as funny as it is, it has underneath of it these really hard calculations that folks are faced with because of the legal institutions we're talking about.

[00:48:06.83] TOM MERRILL: You know, there's this old theory that comedy is a way that we can say unpleasant truths in a relatively pleasant way.

[00:48:13.07] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:48:13.58] TOM MERRILL: Right? But, yeah, I mean, there is something-- I mean, number one, you absolutely-- I mean, I've never seen the BBC version, but I can easily imagine Steve Carell playing this character. You can imagine Michael Scott making proposals that might look like--

[00:48:30.14] SARAH MARSH: I think he makes a couple of proposals in The Office that go, like, a lot--

[00:48:34.51] TOM MERRILL: [LAUGHS] I mean, I guess Mr. Collins takes himself a lot more seriously. And so there's a lot more danger here than there would be with Michael Scott. But you have to imagine someone of that level of pomposity and lack of self-awareness. But yeah.

[00:48:57.80] So we talked about the three proposals in the book. And we're not going to have time to talk about all of them. But this is really important for Elizabeth's character and for her story arc, because this is kind of her declaration of independence. And she's declaring independence not simply from Mr. Collins, but also, as becomes very clear momentarily, from her mother and from the family.

[00:49:19.85] SARAH MARSH: That's right. She is setting out some stakes for her own life that are certainly different from the ones her parents have accepted. And they are also different from what her sisters set out for themselves, even though we can sort of imagine them as being part of the same horizontal generation and that they may have similar kinds of ideas about what marriage is for and how one might enter into marriage.

[00:49:54.66] And Elizabeth is, I think, different even from Jane in the way she thinks about how to approach the institution.

[00:50:04.12] TOM MERRILL: So I don't want to-- this is not quite the right analogy, but there is a moment that is like the confrontation-- of Douglass' confrontation with Covey and the-- I mean, obviously, the stakes here are much less, even though they're still pretty severe than they are in Douglass' case.

[00:50:22.00] But there is this-- that she really has to imagine a world in which she's never going to get married. And she has to say, look, I would rather live in poverty than have to accept being married to this complete fool.

[00:50:35.59] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:50:36.61] TOM MERRILL: And that seems to have something to do with just the possibility of being an autonomous actor.

[00:50:42.37] SARAH MARSH: Yes. And it strikes me-- the more I read this novel, the more I'm struck by all of the language of intellection that characters use when they're describing the ways they understand one another and the ways they understand themselves.

[00:51:01.90] There are some minor characters, like Lydia, whose characterological development happens in the terms of passion. And then there are characters like Elizabeth, who is aware of her own thought practices as she is grappling with these social problems, like the fact that when her father dies, she and her family won't have anywhere to live. And I think the analogy to Douglass is really salient.

[00:51:35.75] And Douglass is living in a very different system of chattel slavery. But it's nonetheless a system that has grown out of the society--

[00:51:45.73] TOM MERRILL: Of feudalism.

[00:51:47.05] SARAH MARSH: --that practices coverture and primogeniture. So either there are some I think some deep institutional relations between what Douglass is up against and what Elizabeth Bennet is up against. And I always remind my students and myself of this. It's a different thing when you're talking about Douglass, who is a historical person, who, to some degree, narrated his own life, and then a writer like Austen, who is working entirely with fictional materials and has some latitude in what she's working with, because she's working purely in fiction.

[00:52:31.36] TOM MERRILL: Right. The stakes are lower. She's not worried about being killed.

[00:52:34.48] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And there are all sorts of comments to be made about what Douglass faced in publishing his narrative and the way that exposed him to recapture after he had run away from slavery in Maryland. And so, yeah, there are some big differences. But the role of knowing yourself in spite of these structures of power that would circumscribe one's life-- at that level of abstraction, I think there is continuity.

[00:53:16.83] TOM MERRILL: Right. And I just want to add one thing about this marriage thing-- that Elizabeth doesn't know at this point in the novel that she'll have another chance to get married in any acceptable way, to her, given her own sense of self-respect. But of course, Austen herself never got married.

[00:53:34.70] So it's easy to read these novels as being pro-marriage propaganda.

[00:53:39.30] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:53:39.79] TOM MERRILL: But at the end of the day, they might not be. Right? I mean, it might be-- maybe Jane herself never met the right guy. But we ought to at least be open to the possibility that maybe that was a choice. There might be a better life than being married.

[00:53:57.83] SARAH MARSH: Austen was proposed to and accepted, and then the next morning recanted.

[00:54:03.96] TOM MERRILL: So my theory is all wrong.

[00:54:06.37] SARAH MARSH: No, no. I think the theory is right. I think that she recanted. She accepted a proposal by a man named-- Harris was his first name, I think. Harris Bigg-Withers, B-I-G-G-hyphen-W-I-T-H-E-R-S.

[00:54:22.00] TOM MERRILL: Wait. His name was Bigg-Withers?

[00:54:23.57] SARAH MARSH: Mm-hmm. Bigg-Withers.

[00:54:25.86] TOM MERRILL: That sounds [INAUDIBLE].

[00:54:26.90] SARAH MARSH: There are critics who joke that she just couldn't abide that last name, because she had no choice. But she accepts him at first. And then the next morning, she recants her acceptance. And so I think there are biographical instances of Austen making these sorts of moves. Now, what her motivations were exactly, we can't know.

[00:54:53.33] But I think that some amount of being a rational creature, being a thinking being, must, of course, have played in to her choices. And I think it's also true, just if you look at the plain history of what it meant to be a married woman in early 19th-century Britain, and what one's childbearing duties were, in order to produce male heirs to continue these property dynasties, and when you add in the risks of having a baby during the period and the high rates of maternal mortality, we might not have all the novels if she had gotten married.

[00:55:40.88] And I think that's part of the direction of the novel, the way it directs us to think about the well-examined life.

[00:55:58.23] TOM MERRILL: You mean because there might be a tension between leading a life of strong practical attachments where you feel like you can do something really good and a life dedicated to seeing things as clearly as a human being could and articulating that.

[00:56:12.73] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:56:13.35] TOM MERRILL: And there might be two attractive models of the good life that are in tension.

[00:56:17.70] SARAH MARSH: Yes. And that sometimes, like in the Collins example, those are at cross purposes with one another. And then, of course, that gets resolved at the end of the novel with the proposal from someone who is Elizabeth's--

[00:56:36.63] TOM MERRILL: Rich. Rich and otherwise acceptable.

[00:56:40.29] SARAH MARSH: Rich and otherwise acceptable.

[00:56:42.20] TOM MERRILL: Right. Yeah.

[00:56:43.32] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. I mean, I think Austen's pretty clear that this happy ending requires 30,000 pounds a year and a big estate, because that's ultimately what solves

some of the problems that crop up toward the end of the novel. So yeah, I think there's no world in which Austen is not thinking about money as essential for comedic endings, like the one she imagines in *Pride and Prejudice*.

[00:57:22.30] TOM MERRILL: Or just the realism that the romanticism that we see and that in a way attracts us-- you know, because we love these stories because there are attachments, and then they get broken up, and then they come back together. But the underlying realism may be the deeper message.

[00:57:38.34] SARAH MARSH: Yes. And I think there's a lot of scholarship that really pays attention to how much money is in play. What are the relationships of wealth to characters' motivations? And Caroline Bingley, in this novel, is, I think, the exemplar of that mercenary sensibility that's really using marriage, thinking about marriage as a way of consolidating money.

[00:58:07.87] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. They're hedge fund traders, except that marriage is their means of investing.

[00:58:14.93] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:58:16.15] TOM MERRILL: So I want to say a couple more things. And then I have a final thing I want to ask you about. I mean, I was thinking about the way that-- so some of the authors that my students are reading in class, thinking about this roots of political economy class especially-- Adam Smith, I think, would very well understand what Austen is saying, that he's also very attuned to the realities of money. And what's the economic substructure that's necessary for having the kind of life that-- and many of us try to avoid thinking about these ugly realities.

[00:58:49.17] But one of the things you can learn from Smith, as, I think, you can learn from Austen if you really take her seriously, is that you can't avoid those things. But he and Austen, I think, would be sort of more or less on the same page. Like, the world is messed up. We try to do the best that we can.

[00:59:06.30] Karl Marx, I think, would see the same thing but would flip the entire narrative and say, look, this is why this world is so screwed up. And anyone with a heart has to rebel. Right? And I think that one could understand that reaction as well, because for all the happy ending of this book, there are many things that should-- I mean, somebody has to get married to Mr. Collins. Right? It's poor Charlotte. And that's sort of a human sadness, I think, from Austen's point of view.

[00:59:35.36] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:59:36.27] TOM MERRILL: Not to mention all of the other-- there's a whole world of people who are not able to participate in this conversation that I think Austen is aware of but doesn't highlight.

[00:59:46.80] SARAH MARSH: That's right. I mean, are you thinking, Tom, about the servants who--

[00:59:50.92] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. The servants, the poor, right? I mean, this is a time in which there's an increasing number of people who've been displaced by the Industrial Revolution and who have really horrific lives in ways that even getting married to Mr. Collins isn't in the same realm, the same magnitude of horribleness.

[01:00:10.41] SARAH MARSH: Right. And as Austen's writing the novel, across the ocean, in a former British colony, institutions of chattel slavery are still very much in practice in the United States. And Austen--

[01:00:29.69] TOM MERRILL: You can't write a comedy about that.

[01:00:31.11] SARAH MARSH: You can't. And that's why Austen writes Mansfield Park, which maybe we should talk about in a different conversation. But those things start to become more visible to Austen as she gets older. She's writing Pride and Prejudice as a fairly young woman.

[01:00:46.62] And as she gets older, I think that the realities of social life in Britain and across the ocean in the United States become very real for her. Her brothers serve in the navy. She does have a certain kind of global sensibility, even though she is typically read as the author of--

[01:01:08.88] TOM MERRILL: The most domestic of authors.

[01:01:09.87] SARAH MARSH: --of domestic manners, in a small village, writing about three or four families, which is something, at one point, she says about herself. But, of course, we know that Austen is saying one thing and doing something else.

[01:01:22.62] TOM MERRILL: Doing another. So we need to wrap up here pretty soon. I have one more line that I feel personally insulted by that I need you to tell me if I should be personally insulted or how I should think about this. So this is a line that comes at the very end of chapter 54-- so near the end of the book.

[01:01:44.22] And it's a conversation that Elizabeth is having with Jane. And it seems a little bit like a throwaway line. It's almost too good for the context, like the context doesn't quite fit. It's the very last-- do you know where I am?

[01:01:58.76] SARAH MARSH: I don't. No, I don't have it. But I think--

[01:02:01.45] TOM MERRILL: I'll read it, and you'll recognize it.

[01:02:03.54] SARAH MARSH: OK.

[01:02:05.46] TOM MERRILL: Jane says, "but why should you wish to persuade me that I feel more than I acknowledge?" And Elizabeth answers, "that is a question which I hardly know how to answer. We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing."

[LAUGHS] And I just can't help but thinking that line-- "we all love to instruct, but we can only teach what is not worth knowing--" that's a slam at professors. Isn't it? I mean, she's talking trash about-- Sarah, she's talking trash about you. Is that fair?

[01:02:31.33] SARAH MARSH: She's on to all of us. Well, no one is safe from Austen's satire, which is why it's so good. Right. I mean, she's making some deliberations. Or she's making some conclusions about how human knowledge practices work and the way we hang on to certain things that we think that we know.

[01:02:56.96] TOM MERRILL: So would you explain that to me?

[01:03:00.46] SARAH MARSH: So can you read the line again?

[01:03:03.31] TOM MERRILL: "We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing."

[01:03:08.40] SARAH MARSH: Right. So the idea being that teaching can only happen when we are not hanging on to the thing that we're teaching as if it is that shared social knowledge that she is sending up at the beginning of the novel. We've got to let go of our own assumptions and our own first impressions if we're really going to teach. Otherwise, we're just instructing.  
[INAUDIBLE].

[01:03:39.23] TOM MERRILL: You might not be able to-- you might have to start with the first impressions. Right? You couldn't go straight to whatever the deeper knowledge is.

[01:03:47.78] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. So, I mean, what's your take on the line?

[01:03:50.84] TOM MERRILL: Well, I mean, I think that you have to distinguish between instructing and teaching something worth knowing. I think instructing means you can teach people a bunch of facts. We can all memorize. That's what we're trained to do in high school and perhaps increasingly more and more in college. But I think she's trying to distinguish that kind of teaching, which is really just conveying information, from a deeper sense of-- which I think is the theme of the whole book-- which is self-knowledge.

[01:04:20.90] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[01:04:21.41] TOM MERRILL: That I can't teach you self-knowledge. I can gesture towards it. I can sort of give you examples of it. I can, as it were-- sometimes I think about, in class, I'm trying to do a dance that I hope the students imitate.

[01:04:35.13] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[01:04:36.95] TOM MERRILL: I think one time I described myself as the Richard Simmons of class, which is maybe a little bit embarrassing. But the facts that you can convey are not the most important thing that a human being needs to know about the world.

[01:04:50.96] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. I think the way I would say it in the context of the novel itself is that it's-- you've got to know the plot. You got to know how the events unfold, and you have to the names of the characters. And you have to apprehend their relationships to one another, the sort of information of the plot.

[01:05:11.44] But you also-- to really know a book like *Pride and Prejudice*-- to know it is to also be aware of the way it's working on you and the way you are working on it and the way it's raising particular kinds of intellectual engagement to one's attention. And these things are-- we do these things all the time.

[01:05:37.77] And the novel both describes the way a character does this-- Elizabeth says, "until then, I never knew myself--" but the novel is also working us through our own thinking about the ways that we know ourself. And the model of Elizabeth shouldn't distract us from the way these practices are at play in our own lives.

[01:06:11.03] We all are making first impressions. We all are trying to gather information all the time. And what we do with it is, I think, a lot of the substance of what Austen wants us to consider.

[01:06:23.89] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. In a way, it goes back to-- you see it in the very first line of the book, that it looks like it's a universal statement, but it turns out to be a projection, an interpretation that is unaware of the fact that it's speaking out of a human anxiety and a human need for something that is set up by a particular political contexts and given the structures of power in that society.

[01:06:46.04] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[01:06:47.66] TOM MERRILL: But that's-- to understand how and why we do that, that's not something that you can learn by memorization. It's something you learn by realizing that, in some sense, you are yourself doing it.

[01:06:59.54] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And in that sense, reading novels and reading them in the way I think that were advocating is the project of becoming liberally educated. And it goes on.

[01:07:16.79] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[01:07:17.16] SARAH MARSH: It goes on the next time we read *Pride and Prejudice* or Frederick Douglass or whatever it is that we're going to read or reread again.

[01:07:26.98] TOM MERRILL: Right, that we're doing work on ourselves. We're trying to be more clear about ourselves. And we're using the book as a kind of instrument to try to force ourselves, because somehow we can't we can't just will ourselves to do it.

[01:07:41.54] SARAH MARSH: That's right. It takes the kind of dialectical engagement with the ideas of others, whether that's across time or in person, to become who we are.

[01:07:53.48] TOM MERRILL: Right. Sarah, that's a great place to end. This has been a great conversation. You've persuaded me that I should read the book again. I was hoping to read something like Thucydides, where a lot of people get killed, but this is almost as good.

[LAUGHS] So I look forward to our next conversation. It's been fun.

[01:08:13.01] Audience, if you have comments or questions or you hate what we said, please tell us. We would love to hear it. So thanks a lot, Sarah. We'll talk to you next time.

[01:08:22.77] SARAH MARSH: Thanks, Tom. Thanks, y'all, for tuning in.