"The Vicious Propensities": The Impact of Gambling in Pride and Prejudice

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In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the character Mr. Wickham is described by Mr. Darcy as having “the vicious propensities” (241) of “idleness and dissipation” (242). Wickham is consistently in a state of indebtedness, due mostly to his gambling habit, and is always seeking ways in which he can obtain more money. Shortly after Wickham runs away with Lydia, Elizabeth and Jane discuss the reformed opinion of Colonel Forster, a member of Wickham’s former regiment, toward the runaway. “he did not speak so well of Wickham as he formerly did. He believed him to be imprudent and extravagant. And since this sad affair has taken place, it is said, that he left Meryton greatly in debt” (331).

Colonel Forster’s admonitions of Wickham’s conduct reflect the assertions that Darcy relates to Elizabeth in a letter condemning Wickham’s behavior and character. In the letter, Darcy explains to Elizabeth how Wickham, within three years, squanders the three thousand pounds given to him upon the death of his and Darcy’s fathers, leaving him completely in debt and in an “exceedingly bad” (242) situation. It is also revealed that Wickham tried to seduce Mr. Darcy’s younger sister in order to receive the thirty thousand pounds to be given to her as her inheritance. After Darcy squelches all of Wickham’s attempts to achieve more money, he joins the militia, where gambling habits and debt still follow closely behind him.

Robert Laurie and James Whittle’s poem “Speculation; or A New Way of Saving a Thousand Pounds” (1798) follows a character named Hazard. This man is a “careless fellow, known at every Gambling-house in town” (lines 1–2). Hazard is constantly fluctuating between winning great amounts of money and being very poor. Some nights he finds himself without the funds to even provide a meal for himself, and other nights, he is able to feast happily. He is representative of the type of character found quite frequently throughout the Regency era and culture, where it was quite common for men to gain and later lose large fortunes all within a few hours at the card tables. There are even accounts of men losing their entire estates in one night at the card tables.

The poem begins with Hazard “stripped...of his last half-crown” (line 14). Hungry, and out of money, Hazard walks the streets looking for some way to turn his luck when he happens across a house where a man is eating a large feast with more than enough to spare. Hazard knocks on his door, and convinces the master of the house to let him eat with him because Hazard claims to know a way to save the man one thousand pounds. After eating his fill of the rich man’s food and drinking much of his wine, Hazard finally tells the man that he will marry his daughter for nine thousand pounds, one thousand less than the ten thousand the wealthy man had originally planned for his daughter’s dowry. Thus, Hazard has saved the man one thousand pounds, and in the process, he has earned nine thousand for himself.

Through the narrative about Hazard, it is easier to understand Jane’s “horror” when she learns of Mr. Wickham’s vice (338). Characters like Hazard prove to be a constant threat to any young woman seeking marriage, however particularly more so to wealthy young women, for example, Georgiana Darcy. Wickham’s attempts to seduce Miss Darcy in pursuit of her inheritance seem more dangerous when it is learned that other men, like Hazard, have been successful in tricking or bribing young women and their families out of their money. For a girl to marry a man with less money and a lower status than herself is already looked down; however, for a girl to be married to a reputed “gamester” is even more so improper and repugnant. This knowledge about gamblers and their immoral and deceitful ambitions creates a more urgent sense of the danger that Lydia and Georgiana face in their dealings with Mr. Wickham, “the wickedest young man in the world” (335).