A Game of Chance: Obligation and Card Games in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

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1. Partners are decided by each person, usually three or four to a game, cutting the deck and those two persons who have the two highest ranking cards are one team. Note that the Ace is only considered the lowest ranking card when deciding for partners. Team members are opposite each other. Whoever cuts the lowest ranking card is the Dealer. The Dealer shuffles the cards and has the Youngest Hand (player on the Dealers right) cut the deck. Note that every player has a right to shuffle and cut the deck if they want, but the Dealer is shown with the cutting of the lowest ranking card beforehand.

2. The Dealer then deals the cards face down starting with the Elder Hand. Tricks are only counted when a team reaches 6 Tricks. The first 6 Tricks are known. “Two Loudon, J. and S. Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice.” Philadelphia: 1815, p. 105. An example of the lack of obligation, the freedom to just sit and ‘twiddle their thumbs,’ throughout the novel is a reflection of the Regency society which saw and treated life as a constant game of chance. By showing Mr. Hurst’s having “therefore nothing to do” one accounts that the ladies have almost universally, and with the utmost willingness, sent to Coventry the tattling and prattling that contributes to their excelling at whist. (542). This examples of the lack of obligation, the freedom to just sit and ‘twiddle their thumbs,’ throughout the novel is a reflection of the Regency society which saw and treated life as a constant game of chance. By showing Mr. Hurst’s having “therefore nothing to do” one accounts that the ladies have almost universally, and with the utmost willingness, sent to Coventry the tattling and prattling that contributes to their excelling at whist. (542).

3. The player on the Dealer’s left begins the game by laying down a card, and the game continues in a clockwise motion. Whoever plays the highest card of that suit wins those cards – the Trick – unless a player happens to play a Trump card, in which they win the Trick. If a player has no cards of the played suit they may play a card of another suit. However, if a player lays down a card of a different suit and, later on, is found to have had the current in play suit that player is guilty of a Revoke and is docked 3 Tricks. If all four cards being played are Trumps, instead of leaving it out and apart of his cards, that deal is to be redone.

4. Tricks are only counted when a team reaches 6 Tricks. The first 6 Tricks of a team gains do not count when keeping score. Only the Tricks after the first 6 count. EX: Team A wins 3 Tricks and Team B wins 10. Team A’s Tricks do not count (there are only 5) and team B’s Tricks count as 4 (10 – 6 = 4 Tricks). The Honours (Ace, King, Queen, and Jack) only count if both players of a team hold 3 of them in their hands (one player holding one of the other holding two) which gives them 3 points. If the team is holding all 4 Honours then they get 4 points. For every Trick that a team has, they earn 1 point. Points are kept for as many rounds being played and the first team to earn 10 points (adding Trick points and Honours points) at the end of the game wins!

Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice reveals characters in a world that have less to do and more time to do it in. The Bennet’s, Mr. Collins, the Bingley’s and Mr. Darcy exhibit a lack of obligation and/or responsibility and do not, necessarily, work in order to earn a living or live comfortably. This lack of concern towards money and the maintaining of societal obligations are seen within the novel and in the Regency where people were more concerned with items of entertainment, such as card games, in order to cater to their free time. Card games were an important addition to any social engagement, both in the novel and throughout the Regency. Privately held balls and smaller social gatherings were considered incomplete without some form of card game readily available. When achieving/maintaining a middle class status, a fashionable made card table was necessary or else a person risked having no class status at all and left in a sort of class limbo. Due to its simplicity and scientific nature, Whist was the more preferred game in the Regency and is seen more in the novel than any other card game. Ironically, the name Whist refers to an observed silence while playing the game, unless it were in regards to the game itself. However, those that play Whist in the novel and the Regency rarely remain silent. The tendencies of gambling and gossip when playing Whist increased the popularity of the game at social gatherings. As the authors of the 1788 issue of The American Magazine say, Whist is “a game, which is so much ingresses the attention of numberless polite assemblies” (542). These activities of gossip and gambling clash with the namesake of Whist as meaning to be performed silently.

This is, besides a game that requires deliberation and silence, which is a word synonymous with whist. It is doubtless on this account that the ladies have almost universally, and with the utmost willingness, sent to Coventry the tattling and prattling and that taciturnity which, when expedient and desirable, is their characteristic, is one of the circumstances that contributes to their excelling at whist. (542).

The notion that Whist was more preferred for its silence is an attraction to novelists such, like Jane Austen, who place this game within their novels. However the characters, usually the women, often socialize by gossiping and confiding secrets amongst each other rather than remaining silent which, according to The American Magazine, was the common assumption. Austen utilizes this attraction to Whist in Pride and Prejudice when she incorporates Whist, and other card games like Loo, Piquet and Quadrille, as a way to reveal some of the more lovable scenes within her novels. An example of such an instance is seen when Jane Bennet, still recovering from her illness while staying at Bingley’s, joins the large party and the characters have tea and talk amongst themselves. However:

When tea was over, Mr. Hurst reminded his sister in-law of the card-table – but in vain. … She assured him that no one intended to play… Mr. Hurst had therefore nothing to do, but stretch himself on one of the sofas and go to sleep. Darcy took up a book; Miss Bingley did the same; and Mrs. Hurst, principally occupied in playing with her bracelets and rings, joined now and then in her brother’s conversation with Miss Bennet. (91)

This examples of the lack of obligation, the freedom to just sit and ‘twiddle their thumbs,’ throughout the novel is a reflection on Regency society which saw and treated life as a constant game of chance. By showing Mr. Hurst’s having “therefore nothing to do” one can see how dependent on entertainments, such as Whist, Austen’s characters and people of the Regency were.