"He Ought not to be Charged for either of these Servants": Servants Constructed as Property

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"He Ought not to be Charged for either of these Servants": Servants Constructed as Property

Servants during the Regency period were identified as seen but not heard. During the Regency period servants were either inferior or superior to their masters. There is evidence that proves how servants held more meaning than property. However, there is also evidence that contradicts this claim of servant’s importance. During the Regency time in London, servants had a relationship to property. Servants, like any property we own today, were taxed. The way these taxes operated were by taxing what the master paid the servant during the year they served them. There were a lot of complications surrounding this system because during Regency culture, younger servants were looked at as charity. In the “Abstract on the Cases and Decisions on Appeals Relating to the Tax on Servants”, we can see that the commissioner is faced with multiple tax fraud cases surrounding the tax on servants. One case against Reverend Mr. Humphreys proves that he had one servant working for him that he did not pay taxes on. Reverend Mr. Humphreys attorney makes his rebuttal by addressing that, “The boy is only twelve years of age, is fatherless, and taken by him out of charity, and is employed by him as an errand-boy; that he pays him no wages, only clothes, and boards him” (Abstract 1). Reverend Humphreys was still forced to pay taxes on this boy servant because he was providing him with clothes and board. This knowledge of taxation on servants shows the ideology of servants holding little importance to Regency Society. Servants became an expectation of the master’s property. A servant’s job was to provide an easier way of living for their master, similar to a piece of land or large estate would. Property and commodities held great importance during Regency period regarding manner. This philosophy can reassure that servants still held importance because they provided their masters with social conduct during the regency time period.

In Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen exemplifies that servants become a part of their masters property. Throughout this novel we see confirmation that higher class society holds the expectation to own servants. We can also identify in Pride and Prejudice that owning property and land is an expectation of middle to higher class. These two ideas are one in the same. In Austen’s novel she demonstrates that servants are property by portraying them as voiceless. This social construct exists in this novel; specifically when Lady Catherine De Bourgh addresses Elizabeth’s family, “Oh! -- Your uncle!-- He keeps a man-servant, does he? I am very glad you have somebody who thinks of those things” (Austen 45). When Lady Catherine is surprised that Elizabeth’s family keeps a man servant; she implies that Elizabeth is lower-class. Lower-class is associated with not being able to own commodities such as servants. Understanding that Regency Culture taxed servants, we can further understand the importance of servants in Pride and Prejudice. This knowledge of taxation on servants shows that servants are viewed as commodities during Regency culture. Servants portrayed as property importance is reduced because their human classification is being removed. However, Austen’s novel proves that servant’s importance is increased...
because in Pride and Prejudice it can be argued that commodities hold more importance than any human in the novel. For example Elizabeth falls in love with Darcy after visiting his huge property, Pemberley. Commodities are held at a higher importance because they shape the class and conduct that Regency culture expects from society.