

# NORTHLIGHT THEATRE

## Season Access Curriculum

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### 18th & 19th Century English Social Structure

individual. Children held the social position of their father, and, if one member of the family was involved in a scandal, all members of the family would be affected equally by any backlash.

Questions of status and class are a major preoccupation of Jane Austen's characters. Austen focuses greatly on the class system and lack of social mobility allowed in England in the 18th Century. For centuries the aristocracy had been the most powerful section of British society. But from the last quarter of the 18th century, the middle classes began to grow in power and confidence.

Land was no longer the only source of wealth. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, it was now possible to make a fortune from manufacturing and trading goods. There were all sorts of new professional, technical, and clerical roles that required a high degree of education and training. Brian, the footman at Pemberley in *The Wickhams*, is considering how his mechanical skills may help him transition out of his role in service. He is constantly making gadgets and inventions, which eventually catch the eye of Mr. Darcy, master at Pemberley. If Brian were to secure an apprenticeship, he could potentially move from the lower to the middle class. The number of people who counted as middle class began to swell, and men became defined by their jobs rather than their family background. Such is the case for the Bingleys, who made their wealth in trade as opposed to being titled or owning land.



### Women, Marriage, and Power

Prior to the 19th century, it was considered normal and acceptable for a wife to work alongside her husband at the family business. As the century went on, however, more men started to commute to work, and women stayed home to take care of domestic duties. This led the way to defining characteristics of 19th century women such as obeying their fathers and husbands, acting docile and without opinions, exhibiting refined qualities, and attending to their families.

Marrying off a daughter to a suitable gentleman and crafting her into a good housewife and respectable member of society was often seen as a lifetime of work. Men were expected to be the provider in a marriage. This viewpoint was reflected in the laws of the time - husbands would take care of their wives upon marriage, and the wife would forfeit all personal wealth over to her husband.

The prevalence of courting in 19th century England signaled a change in how marriages were formed. Arranged marriages, the dominant system in the past, were no longer popular. Of course, parents still expected to be consulted about their child's potential partner, and a child usually respected parental opinion. For the most part, though, men and women chose their own romantic partners. In *The Wickhams*, one of the central characters in the conflict, George Wickham, is attempting to achieve upward social mobility by marrying Elizabeth Darcy's sister, Lydia Bennet. Marriage was still a public connection between families and would ideally strengthen each family's social position. Therefore, most people did not court or marry outside of their social class.

### Resource!

USA Today's take on modern audience's fascination with the Bennet's:  
["Why are we still so passionate about \*Pride & Prejudice\*?"](#)

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