

# Pom-Poms and Prejudice

A comedy

*By Bryan Starchman*

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### **Playwright's Note**

When Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* over two centuries ago, she probably never imagined her story would translate so perfectly to a modern high school. Yet here we are, with Elizabeth Bennet leading cheers instead of taking countryside walks, and Darcy writing pretentious plays instead of managing Pemberley.

As a playwright and educator, I've always been struck by how many of Austen's themes resonate with today's teenagers. The pressure to meet family expectations, the challenge of seeing past first impressions, the struggle between practicality and passion – these are as relevant to today's high school students as they were to Austen's Bennet sisters.

In adapting this beloved novel for the stage, I chose to embrace both the humor and heart of the original while translating it into a world today's students understand. Elizabeth and her sisters navigate not just romance but college applications, extracurricular activities, and social media presence. Darcy's pride manifests in theatrical ambitions rather than land ownership. Even Mrs. Bennet's marriage obsession finds new life in her enthusiastic embrace of PemberleyPrep posts, potential homecoming dates, and the promise of future dental insurance plans.

Some changes were necessary, of course. Wickham's scandal needed to be more appropriate for high school performers and audiences while still maintaining its impact on the family's reputation. Charlotte's practical marriage became a practical career choice. And Lady Catherine De Bourgh found new life as an incredibly intense cheer coach.

But at its core, this is still a story about pride, prejudice, and the courage it takes to admit when you've judged someone unfairly. It's about family (even when they're embarrassing you on social media), friendship (even when they're making questionable life choices), and learning to see people for who they really are (even if they write terrible plays about teenage angst).

My hope is that this adaptation will not only entertain but might also inspire students to explore Austen's novel and recognize how its themes continue to resonate in their own lives. After all, high school – like a Jane Austen novel – is ultimately about figuring out who you are and who you want to be.

Break a leg!

Bryan Starchman

## **SYNOPSIS**

Perfect for high school performers, this fresh adaptation sets Jane Austen's beloved novel in the hallways of Pemberley High School. Elizabeth Bennet is a smart, outspoken cheerleader just trying to survive junior year. But life gets complicated when wealthy transfer student Charles Bingley arrives and instantly falls for Elizabeth's sister Jane. His pretentious best friend and president of the drama club, William Darcy, seems determined to ruin everyone's happiness – especially Elizabeth's.

As Elizabeth navigates the social hierarchy of Pemberley High, she finds herself dealing with her boy-crazy younger sisters (one of whom runs off to pursue reality TV fame), her mother's increasingly desperate matchmaking schemes, and the charming new ROTC cadet with a mysterious grudge against Darcy. Add in an awkward youth pastor with a Christian rap career, a best friend who makes questionable but practical life choices, and more high school drama than a semester's worth of detention, and you've got a comedy that proves first impressions aren't always what they seem.

This play maintains the wit and heart of Austen's novel, while tackling contemporary issues like social media pressure, college applications, and the eternal awkwardness of high school romance. Students will relate to the modern setting, and teachers will appreciate the literary connections and surprising moments of poignancy amid the laughter.

Approximately 75-90 minutes.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(5 m, 9 w, 4-6 extras, 18-20 roles)*

**ELIZABETH BENNET:** Junior cheerleader, our witty narrator.

**JANE BENNET:** Senior cheerleader, kind-hearted.

**MARY BENNET:** Sophomore, runs the school's meditation club.

**KITTY BENNET:** Freshman, aspiring influencer.

**LYDIA BENNET:** Freshman, youngest, drama club fan #1.

**MRS. BENNET:** Their mother, obsessed with getting her daughters "good matches," be that romantic or that they get into good colleges.

**MR. BENNET:** Their father, would rather read in his study.

**WILLIAM DARCY:** Senior, president of drama club and certified "theater kid."

**CHARLES BINGLEY:** New rich kid, instantly popular.

**CAROLINE BINGLEY:** Charles's sister, thinks she's better than everyone.

**GEORGE WICKHAM:** JROTC cadet with a mysterious past.

**CARL COLLINS:** Junior youth pastor trying to fund his very ambitious, very questionable youth ministry building campaign.

**CHARLOTTE LUCAS:** Elizabeth's practical best friend, yearbook editor.

**COACH DE BOURGH:** Darcy's aunt, intimidating cheer coach.

**ADDITIONAL STUDENTS:** (4-6 actors with doubling.)

Cheer Squad Members, Drama Club Members, JROTC Cadets, Various Students, Voice of Principal Long, Voice of Competition Announcer.

\*See additional notes at the end of the script.

**Scene 1: “First Impressions and Other Disasters”**

*(AT RISE: The hallway of Pemberley High. Wood-paneled walls lined with navy and gold banners, trophy cases, and a large mural of their mascot – a giant #1 Fan Foam Finger because they are “The Fighting First Impressions.” Lockers are painted in alternating navy and gold. ELIZABETH stands at her locker, arranging pom-poms.)*

**ELIZABETH:** *(To audience.)* I’m Elizabeth Bennet and welcome to Pemberley High. *(Slams her locker shut.)* Every high school has three essential things: terrible cafeteria food, at least one nervous breakdown per semester, and drama. At Pemberley High, we excel at all three. Oh, *(Holding up her phone.)* and we have PemberleyPrep – the school’s unofficial social network, where everyone performs their best life for an audience of people they barely like. Think Jane Austen meets high school hierarchy, with a dash of digital desperation.

*(KITTY and LYDIA rush in, phones out.)*

**ELIZABETH:** *(Cont’d.)* Speaking of drama, I should probably mention that I’m one of five sisters. Yes, five. My mom calls us her “beautiful blessings.” My dad calls us his “beautiful budget-busters.” Jane’s the oldest and somehow the kindest person in any room she walks into. I’m the second and... opinionated. Mary’s the middle child and... well... let’s just call her “philosophical.” And then there’s... *(Gestures as KITTY and LYDIA giggling over their phones.)* those two. Kitty and Lydia, the babies of the family. Kitty copies everything Lydia does, and Lydia copies everything she sees on social media. They’re basically living, breathing TikTok accounts with dreams of being Broadway stars.

**LYDIA:** Lizzy! Have you seen the latest PemberleyPrep post? New hot guy alert!

**KITTY:** His name is Charles Bingley, and his family just bought, like, half the houses in Netherfield Estates!

**ELIZABETH:** Let me guess, Mom's already planning the wedding?

*(MRS. BENNET's voice comes through their phones simultaneously. She can stand DS in her own SPOTLIGHT as she records this message.)*

**MRS. BENNET:** EMERGENCY FAMILY GROUP CHAT! New boy enrolling TODAY! Jane, wear your competition bow! Lizzy, please attempt to control your sarcasm! Mary, maybe skip the meditation club pitch until AFTER he falls in love with one of you! This could be our chance at securing prime pew seats at Longbourn Community Church!

**ELIZABETH:** *(To audience.)* My mother, the only person who RSVPs to other people's futures.

*(JANE enters, perfect as always in her cheer uniform.)*

**JANE:** Has anyone actually met this Charles person, or is this just another of Mom's five-year plans for our futures?

**KITTY:** *(Reading her phone.)* According to PemberleyPrep, he moved here because he wants to finish high school with his best friend – some senior named William Darcy who's the cheerleading coach's nephew and, like, president of the drama club for the entire state.

**LYDIA:** You mean THE William Darcy?

**KITTY:** Um...I guess.

**LYDIA:** Oh my God! He gets, like, every lead role in every play, but I've never met him because he spent last semester studying in Manhattan!

**KITTY:** Wow! A celebrity!

**ELIZABETH:** Let's not get ahead of ourselves—

**LYDIA:** *(Cutting ELIZABETH off.)* And look! Charles Bingley has a sister named Caroline! She has three million followers on... *(Catches herself getting too excited.)* I mean, she's very... socially connected.

*(MARY enters, carrying meditation crystals.)*

**MARY:** Material possessions and social status are merely constructs of our capitalist society's—

**ALL:** NOT NOW, MARY!

*(CHARLES enters with CAROLINE and DARCY. Charles is eager but oblivious to his own privilege. Caroline always looks like she's smelling something unpleasant and is wearing designer clothes while carrying a designer bag. Darcy is radiating theatrical superiority wearing a black "thespian" t-shirt.)*

**CHARLES:** Hi! I'm looking for the main office. I assume it will look a little less shoddy than the rest of this school. *(Looks around with his nose in the air.)* Looks like Daddy and Mummy's servants' quarters.

**CAROLINE:** Charles, please. We don't want to seem... elitist.

**ELIZABETH:** *(Under her breath.)* Too late.

**JANE:** *(Stepping forward.)* I can show you! I'm Jane Bennet, senior class representative and varsity cheer captain.

**CHARLES:** *(Instantly smitten.)* I love cheerleaders! I mean... I love... school spirit! Which cheerleading promotes! Through... cheering!

**DARCY:** *(Under his breath.)* Smooth, Charles. Real smooth.

*(JANE exits leading CHARLES toward the main office, already in mid-conversation. CAROLINE follows two steps behind them, head angled away as if proximity to the school hallway is physically uncomfortable. KITTY and LYDIA trail after, phones already out, heads together, whispering and giggling. MARY exits the opposite direction alone, unhurried, reading, "The Complete Guide to Crystal Healing.")*

**ELIZABETH:** *(Pulls a cheer practice notice from her locker, pom-poms tucked under her arm and turns to address the audience.)* And that was the moment Jane acquired a shadow named Charles Bingley. Unfortunately, his shadow came with two more shadows, and one of them was about to become the bane of my existence.

*(DARCY, with drama club flyers tucked under one arm, approaches the bulletin board where ELIZABETH is about to post a cheer practice notice.)*

**DARCY:** *(Reaching past HER to pin up a drama club flyer, covering part of her notice.)* Excuse me.

**ELIZABETH:** Actually, I was putting something there...

**DARCY:** *(Barely glancing at HER.)* The drama club flyers take priority. Principal's orders.

**ELIZABETH:** Really? The principal specifically said, "Make sure Darcy's flyers for *(Reading and grimacing.)* 'Angst in A Minor: A Play About Ennui' coverup all other school activities"?

**DARCY:** *(Finally looking at HER.)* The Darcy family donated this theater. And the library wing. And the gymnasium. So yes, my flyers are more important.

**ELIZABETH:** Oh, so you're just going to act like you own the place?

**DARCY:** No one said anything about acting. *(Glancing at her pom-poms with barely concealed disdain.)* And... you must be one of the rah-rah girls.

**ELIZABETH:** I'm a cheerleader. We do actual athletics, not just spirit fingers.

**DARCY:** *(Examining his drama flyer.)* How... quaint. I suppose every school needs its human exclamation points.

**ELIZABETH:** Better than writing depressing, hackneyed plays. *(Imitating his tone.)* "Act One: I'm sad. Act Two: I'm still sad, but now in iambic pentameter and a beret."

**DARCY:** *(Stiffening.)* I wouldn't expect you to understand theatrical nuance.

**ELIZABETH:** And I wouldn't expect you to understand anything that doesn't involve a soliloquy about your clichéd teenage feelings.

**DARCY:** Now just a minute—

**ELIZABETH:** *(Walking away.)* Sorry, I can't hear you over your own smug sense of self-worth.

*(ELIZABETH leaves DARCY seething at the bulletin board, where he proceeds to cover every other notice with his drama club flyers -- methodically at first, then with increasing petty satisfaction, stapler firing like a weapon. CHARLOTTE enters with her yearbook camera and immediately begins photographing him. In the background, the hallway fills: CHARLES drifting after JANE, CAROLINE a reluctant step behind them, STUDENTS passing between classes, none of them noticing or caring about Darcy's one-man theatrical takeover of the bulletin board.)*

**ELIZABETH:** *(Cont'd. To audience.)* And this is Charlotte Lucas, my best friend since kindergarten and our yearbook's editor-in-chief. She's practical, honest, and the only person in this school who sees through everyone's social media facades. Plus, she's probably the smartest person here, even if she pretends not to be. Her motto is: "Better to have a stable future than an unstable romance."

**CHARLOTTE:** Lizzy! Quick poses for the "New Semester, New Drama" spread!

**DARCY:** *(Loudly to CHARLES.)* Please tell me we won't have to do one of those terrible "school spirit" assemblies. I simply can't bear watching JV cheerleaders attempt lifts they clearly haven't mastered.

**ELIZABETH:** *(To audience.)* I'm varsity, thank you very much.

**CAROLINE:** Darcy's right. At our old school, we only associated with dancers who had been accepted to Juilliard.

**ELIZABETH:** *(To audience.)* Their old school was in Manhattan.

**CHARLOTTE:** *(Snapping photos.)* This is gold for my "Rich Kids Say the Darndest Things" section!

**CAROLINE:** Darcy's staying with his aunt Coach De Bourgh while his parents are in France renovating their chateau.

**ELIZABETH:** *(To audience.)* Because of course they were. And of course they had a chateau.

**DARCY:** *(Stiffly.)* The renovations are taking longer than expected. Mother insists the paint colors must perfectly match the original 18<sup>th</sup> century palette.

*(COACH DE BOURGH appears suddenly.)*

**COACH DE BOURGH:** William! I told you to text me the moment you arrived at school! How else can I monitor your artistic development while acting as your temporary guardian?

**DARCY:** *(Under breath.)* Temporary being the operative word...

**COACH DE BOURGH:** Jane! Elizabeth! *(THEY both jump.)* Did you practice those spirit fingers exercises I assigned over summer?

**JANE and ELIZABETH:** *(Together.)* Yes, coach!

**COACH DE BOURGH:** Let me see! *(JANE and ELIZABETH dazzle the crowd with their spirit fingers.)* Bigger! More intense! *(THEY really give it their all.)* That's better. Keep practicing!

*(COACH DE BOURGH blows her whistle and storms back off stage. MRS. BENNET appears as if summoned by rich kid radar carrying a lunch labeled "Jane.")*

**MRS. BENNET:** Girls! Why didn't anyone tell me the new students were HERE? *(To CHARLES.)* You must be Charles Bingley! I've already stalked your family online and checked out your father's net worth... I mean, welcome to Pemberley High!

**JANE:** Mom! What are you doing here?!

**MRS. BENNET:** *(Holding up the bag.)* You forgot your lunch.

**JANE:** *(Holding up another paper bag with her name clearly written on it, realizing her mom was looking for any excuse to show up on campus.)* No. I didn't.

**MRS. BENNET:** Yes, you did!

**JANE:** Then what's in it?

**MRS. BENNET:** *(Opens the bag with great confidence. She peers inside. She reaches in and slowly pulls out a stapler. Not missing a beat.)* ...Your lunch.

**JANE:** That's a stapler.

**MRS. BENNET:** You need to keep your strength up.

**JANE:** But—

**MRS. BENNET:** (*Cutting her off.*) Jane, darling, your bow is crooked. You won't have a prayer at securing a suitable homecoming date with crooked cheer accessories!

(*COLLINS appears, wearing a backwards baseball cap and carrying his youth ministry guitar.*)

**COLLINS:** Did someone say prayer? I mean... 'sup, fellow kids?

**ELIZABETH:** (*To audience.*) And this is Carl Collins, our church's junior youth pastor in training who thinks adding "yo" to Bible verses makes them more relatable.

**COLLINS:** Just spreading the good word, fam! And possibly securing some donations for our new youth ministry smoothie bar...

(*DARCY and CAROLINE begin to exit regally, while CHARLES lingers, trying to seem casual while stealing glances at JANE.*)

**DARCY:** (*Snapping in front of CHARLES's face.*) This way, Charles. Remember, we have drama club applications to review. We can't just let *anyone* audition for Sondheim.

(*SFX: A bell rings. LIGHTS fade to black as STUDENTS hurry to class.*)

**End of Scene**

**Scene 2: “Social Food Chain”**

*(LIGHTS up. The Pemberley High cafeteria. Long tables with attached benches dominate the space. A giant banner reading “Home of the Fighting First Impressions” hangs above the lunch line. The popular kids’ table is clearly marked by its premium location near the vending machines. ELIZABETH addresses the audience while arranging her lunch tray.)*

**ELIZABETH:** *(This can be prerecorded.)* And now, witness the traditional “new student cafeteria seating ritual,” where we discover exactly where everyone stands in the Pemberley High social hierarchy. The popular table? Premium real estate – right next to the only working vending machine. Theater kids? Stage left, obviously. And the rest of us? We’re just trying not to sit at the table that wobbles.

*(STUDENTS enter and arrange themselves at various tables.)*

**CHARLOTTE:** *(Setting up her camera.)* This is perfect for my “Lunchroom Anthropology” photo essay.

**ELIZABETH:** Aren’t you supposed to be taking pictures for the actual yearbook?

**CHARLOTTE:** Lizzy, trust me – in twenty years, no one’s going to care about the football team photo, but they’ll definitely want to remember the day Caroline Bingley discovered our cafeteria serves tater tots.

*(CAROLINE approaches with her lunch tray, looking horrified.)*

**CAROLINE:** Charles, they expect us to eat food that’s... touched other food.

**CHARLES:** *(Distracted, watching JANE.)* What? Oh, yeah. Tragic.

**DARCY:** *(Appearing with his own lunch.)* I suppose we’ll have to suffer through it. Like that time I had to perform off-off-Broadway in “Les Mis.”

## **End of Freeview**

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