

Bradshaw, Penelope ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7240-9206> (2025) Who was Jane Austen's best leading man? These experts think they know. The Conversation UK .

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In the fluctuations of the novel's plot, he and Fanny offer care, caution, and comfort to each other, so that, in some respects, they might be said to come to their eventual marriage on slightly more equal terms.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, *Pride and Prejudice*

Championed by Penny Bradshaw, associate professor of English literature, University of Cumbria

On one level, Mr Darcy needs no championing. Cultural evidence (from branded tea-towels and other merchandise, to multiple portrayals on screen) suggests that he remains the most popular of Austen's heroes.

His "fine, tall person" and "handsome features" are clearly important factors here, but his chilly reserve and initial dismissal of Elizabeth Bennet as merely "tolerable" do not immediately endear him to the reader.



Matthew Macfadyen as Mr Darcy. Cinematic/Alamy Stock Photo/Canva

The source of Darcy's very great appeal lies partly in the fact that he begins to love her in spite of his own prejudices and because, while Darcy does undoubtedly admire Lizzie's appearance (including her "fine eyes"), his admiration extends to qualities which, at this point in time, were hardly typical of the fictional heroines of romance.

Lizzie bears little resemblance to the usually rather passive and often victimised heroines encountered in countless popular novels of the late-18th and early-19th century. Crucially, Darcy is drawn to the "liveliness" of Lizzie's mind and as a hero he therefore validates a new kind of heroine: a woman whose wit and intelligence is as much a part of her attraction as physical appearance.

Captain Wentworth, *Persuasion*

Championed by Emrys D. Jones, senior lecturer in 18th-century literature and culture, King's College London