

Marital Flaws and Moral Education in *Pride and Prejudice*

It is my honor to give the Christopher B. Nelson Lecture tonight. Mr. Nelson is an alum of the college and was president of St. John's College in Annapolis, beginning in 1991. His presidency was marked by consistent care for our community of learning and lasted for more than 25 years, a remarkably long tenure for a college president.

I'd like to take this opportunity to invite you all to the question period after lecture, to be held in the Conversation Room. We call it the question period rather than the question-and-answer period for a reason, so adjust your expectations accordingly. By tradition, students are expected to ask the first few questions.

The main plotline of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* follows Elizabeth Bennet, or Lizzy, the second oldest Bennet daughter, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a landed gentleman, as they go from immediate mutual dislike to Darcy's infatuation with Elizabeth and reluctant proposal of marriage (which she rejects), to Lizzy's change of heart and their ultimate marriage. The reader is privy to the growth in wisdom and maturity of Darcy and especially of Lizzy, as they transcend their own moral weaknesses. The main foil of the plot is Mr. Wickham, the childhood companion turned enemy of Darcy, who joins the militia and charms everyone in town at first, including Lizzy. His bad character is revealed privately to Lizzy by Darcy, and then publicly to the town after he runs away in scandal and debt. Wickham, though he himself never reforms, turns out to provide one of the means of reform for our protagonists. After being shown the falsehood of Mr. Wickham's story about him, Lizzy realizes and regrets the glee she had taken in believing evil of Darcy. On Darcy's part, after learning how repugnant his proposal is to Lizzy, because of what she had been told about his behavior towards Wickham, he realizes how obnoxiously prideful he had been behaving.

As their eyes are opened to their own faulty behavior, both Lizzy and Darcy become better people. The story of their romance is inextricably connected to their moral education. Once they are married, they bring a bounty to the world. As their love for each other leads to their own moral virtue, they bring that virtue to others, softening hearts and uplifting minds and souls. [For a more detailed look at the Darcys, you can check out a previous lecture I gave in April of 2019, that focused on this couple.]

The Darcys' marriage is not the only depiction of matrimony that we get from the novel, however. Three other couples develop over the course of the action: Lizzy's friend Charlotte marries the clownish Mr. Collins; Lizzy's youngest sister Lydia runs off and eventually marries the deceptively charming Mr. Wickham; and her older sister Jane marries the honorable but overly diffident Mr. Bingley. If Lizzy and Darcy give the reader a model of how a virtuous and loving marriage can produce great fruit in the world, the other marriages formed show different ways in which marriages can be helpful or hurtful to the people involved and to the broader society.

Preceding all of these marriages, though, is the foundation established by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Lizzy's parents. The novel takes place when the children are mostly grown, from Lydia at fifteen to Jane in her early twenties. The reader is thus introduced to the Bennets over twenty years after their wedding. The newlywed bloom has long worn off. The intensive work of raising young children is over. At the time of the novel, a steady stream of vignettes and conversations between the Bennets depict the state of their relationship.

Austen has, however, given us something more than this episodic picture of the Bennets: through the characters of their five daughters, the fruits of their marriage over eight years or so of childbearing. In the characters of the five daughters, we see a reflection of the slow collapse of the Bennets' marriage, from love and hope to indifference and near depravity. If Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage promises hope through an effusion of virtue, Austen reveals through the other Bennet daughters what can happen when a marriage sours, when affection evanesces, when the duty of love is shirked.

The opening scene of *Pride and Prejudice* begins with the following exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet¹:

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

¹ All quotes, unless otherwise noted, taken from: Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*, Penguin Books, 375 Hudson St, New York, NY 10014, 1996.

“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“Do not you want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.²

Mrs. Bennet proceeds to narrate the details – how Mr. Bingley, a single man of some wealth, will soon be taking on Netherfield Park, an estate within a few miles of the Bennets’ home, and how high her hopes are of securing him as a husband for one of her daughters.

This introduction to the Bennets is full of charm and wit. Mrs. Bennet is introduced as Mr. Bennet’s “lady,” yet she has all the hallmarks of a scheming mother, heavily involved in the gossip of the town and trying to get her husband interested and involved. For his part, Mr. Bennet seems resigned to her chattering ways, but ready to tease her when he can, for his and the readers’ amusement.

The novel begins with this lighthearted depiction of a middle-aged married couple with all the well-worn patterns of mutual behavior that such a couple evokes, played up for laughs, or at least the amused smiles, of the reader. Some two thirds of the novel later, as the Bennets’ youngest daughter Lydia is on the point of moving to Brighton to become a kind of “militia groupie”, Austen delivers this sobering statement, from the point of view of Lizzy:

Had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort...Elizabeth...had never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behaviour as a husband...she had never felt so strongly as now the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage...³

The change in tone is notable, between the quaint opening scene of a comfortable couple to the stark depiction of the plight of the children who were

² Austen, p5.

³ Austen, p. 198.

raised in such an “unsuitable” marriage. The cause for this sober reflection is the anticipated chaos that Lydia’s unrestrained behavior will bring to the family, and, specifically, to the marriage prospects of eldest sister Jane. Lizzy has already heard from Mr. Darcy that the foibles of her family have been the main reason for his determination to separate Jane from Mr. Bingley, when the latter was of a mind to settle down with Jane. Lizzy can only imagine the further problems that her youngest sister Lydia’s behavior will bring to them all. As we learn later, and as Mr. Bennet himself affirms, Lizzy’s worries were right on point. Lydia ends up running away with the unsavory Mr. Wickham, which brings disgrace to the whole Bennet family until the situation is resolved, finally through the efforts of Mr. Darcy himself.

One way of approaching *Pride and Prejudice*, then, is as a story of how critical the suitability of marriages is for the education and formation of the children who spring from them. As Aristotle tells us in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, “...it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference.”⁴ An upbringing in virtue is critical for the ability of a person to live a life of virtue. Austen seems to agree with Aristotle to some degree, but rather than a philosophical exhortation, she gives us a story. On the one hand, the reader is treated to the positive example of Lizzy and Darcy, whose relationship leads to great flourishing for everyone around them. Lizzy’s parents, the Bennets, can be seen as a foil to the main action of the story, a kind of negative example of how a marriage that seems to be perfectly appropriate, but is actually “unsuitable”, can lead to problems for those around them, most notably, the children.

What sort of marriage qualifies as “unsuitable”? Mr. Bennet, “...captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection to her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished forever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown.”⁵ Mr. Bennet, we are told, currently spends his days in

⁴ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Ostwald, Martin, trans. Library of Liberal Arts, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 07632, 1962.

⁵ Austen, p. 198.

the country or with his books, and teases his wife for his own amusement. Though he avoids the worse fate of taking solace in the more unsavory pleasures of life, he also avoids exerting himself to restrain his wife in her ignorance and small-mindedness.

One painful example of Mr. Bennet's lack of intervention occurs at the Netherfield Ball, where Mrs. Bennet speaks loudly and long on her hopes for Jane's marriage to Mr. Bingley. This conversation is mortifying to Lizzy, who attempts to quell her mother's speech. Lizzy's attempts have a predictable lack of effect on her mother, who continues to boast about the putative upcoming wedding. One can imagine another scenario in which Mr. Bennet, keen to protect his wife's reputation, gives her a look or quiet word, which Mrs. Bennet would be obliged to respect. Alas, his inaction allows Mrs. Bennet to embarrass the family.

This sort of correction never comes, regardless of repeated instances of inappropriate behavior by Mrs. Bennet. Moreover, under the constant confusion provided by Mr. Bennet's jokes and idiosyncrasies, Mrs. Bennet becomes ever more fretful and silly. Consequently, we are told, Mrs. Bennet is exposed to the ridicule of her own children, who cannot respect her, as is exemplified in Lizzy's mortification over her mother's speech at the Netherfield Ball. Lizzy attempts not to notice the "continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum" which she witnesses in her father, who, though likely unable to "enlarge the mind" of his wife, could at least have reined her in, so as to protect her from the scorn of her children.⁶

We don't get quite as much insight into Mrs. Bennet's perspective, but it is safe to say that she is regularly frazzled by her husband and his games. She herself is energetic in the pursuit of husbands for her daughters and, thus, a means for future security for them. Because Mr. Bennet's estate is entailed upon a male heir, which the Bennets have never managed to produce, the daughters will be left with very little to live on when Mr. Bennet dies. Mrs. Bennet is frustratingly short-sighted in her idea of what would make a good husband for them. Money and general amiability seem to be the only qualities she cares about. Still, she is the only one of the parents to take the situation seriously. One wonders why Mr.

⁶ Austen, p. 198.

Bennet is not more exercised by the need to make sure his children are well provided for after his death.

The Bennets' marriage began in captivation, youth, and beauty, with respect, esteem, and confidence. Over time, their relationship unraveled, erasing the foundational affection they had for one another. One can imagine a realization on his part over time of the small-minded woman he had married, leading to the decrease and eventual loss of all of those qualities of respect and affection.

Lizzy sees for herself how her mother's lack of restraint and her father's constant teasing has led to problems for the children. Austen puts these problems on full display for us in the narrative, through the personalities and actions of the five Bennet daughters. We can imagine that the first child, Jane, came fairly early on in the marriage. At the time of the novel, Jane is twenty-two years old, and the marriage is likely about twenty-three years old. From the eldest two, Jane and Lizzy, who are routinely described as well respected by the neighbors, through Mary and Kitty, who are less well respected, to the youngest, Lydia at fifteen, who has no ability or desire to restrain her passions, we can see the unfolding of the problems of the Bennets' marriage. By the time Lydia comes along, Mr. Bennet has given up his hopes of "domestic felicity" and settled in for years of using his wife for his own sport, thus exacerbating her fretful and emotional temperament.

In this lecture, I will examine each of the sisters in turn, taking what clues I can from Austen's descriptions and imagining the turn of mind inspired by each phase of the Bennets' marriage.

Jane Bennet

The eldest of the Bennets' daughters, Jane is professed by all to be the most beautiful young woman in the area. Unlike in her mother's case, Jane's beauty is linked with both goodness and good sense. Towards the end of the novel, when Lizzy is listening to Mr. Bingley's effusions of joy and hope in his future marriage to Jane, Lizzy muses that their happiness will, in fact, be well founded because of: "...the excellent understanding and super-excellent disposition of Jane..."⁷

⁷ Austen, p. 289.

We have abundant evidence of her good sense and disposition in how she handles the drama surrounding her relationship with Bingley. At the first ball they see each other, when both Mr. Bingley and his sisters single her out, Jane is gratified by the attention, though in a quieter way, we are told, than her mother. Rather than the loud triumph we hear from Mrs. Bennet, Jane privately gushes to Lizzy, but keeps her cool around the rest of her family and friends. Lizzy approves of this self-restraint, thinking that “since Jane united with great strength of feeling a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner,” she would be guarded from “the suspicions of the impertinent.”⁸ In a society in which neighborhood opinion holds such power, Lizzy is grateful that Jane, at least, will not be feeding the gossip mill.

Notably, Lizzy’s best friend Charlotte sounds a warning to Lizzy that Jane, in exhibiting such apparent complacency, is at risk of being misunderstood by Bingley himself, who might not know her well enough to realize that she is partial to him. It turns out that Charlotte is right to worry, as Bingley is easily persuaded by the interfering Darcy that Jane is not interested in him. This leads to Bingley leaving Netherfield, never to return, or so his sister communicates to Jane. The complete lack of self-interest in Jane’s interactions with Bingley, while objectively laudable, is subjectively risky, given the difficulty of communication between people in this, or really in any, era, especially in matters of love.

In her initial attraction to Bingley, Jane exhibits some growth and maturity from her past, according to her sister and confidante, Lizzy. Her “super-excellent disposition” plays out in a strong inclination to only see the good in people and to discount or reason away the bad. Apparently, this has led her, in the past, to fall for young men who are unworthy of her. Lizzy tells Jane, “...you have liked many a stupider person [than Bingley]... Oh! you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eye. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life.” In response, Jane says, “I would wish not to be hasty in censuring any one; but I always speak what I think.” Lizzy responds, “I know you do; and it is that which makes the wonder. With your good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others... But to be candid without ostentation or design – to take the

⁸ Austen, p. 20.

good of everybody's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad, belongs to you alone."⁹

The two sisters disagree in their evaluation of several people towards the beginning of the novel, including Bingley's sisters and Darcy. Lizzy sees how Bingley's sisters lose interest in Jane as soon as she leaves the room. Jane believes, however, that they are amiable and true friends to her, until their disregard is fully displayed to her as they rudely dismiss their friendship when they are all in town. At that point, to her credit, she doesn't make any more excuses for them, but does maintain that, given the evidence presented to her, her confidence in their friendship was as natural as Lizzy's suspicion, and "...if the same circumstances should be repeated again, I am sure I would be deceived again."¹⁰ We see even more of Jane's goodness when Wickham alleges that Darcy has ruined him by denying him a position that Darcy's father had intended for him to have. Upon being presented with a general support of Darcy's goodness by Bingley, we learn that "...though Jane would have defended either or both, had they appeared to be wrong, she could no more explain such behaviour than her sister...she knew not how to believe that Mr. Darcy could be so unworthy of Mr. Bingley's regard; and yet it was not in her nature to question the veracity of a young man of such amiable appearance as Mr. Wickham. The possibility of his having really endured such unkindness was enough to interest all her tender feelings; and nothing therefore remained to be done, but to think well of them both, to defend the conduct of each, and to throw into the account of accident or mistake, whatever could not be otherwise explained."¹¹

When more evidence comes to light, in the form of Darcy's letter to Elizabeth detailing the history of Wickham's immoral and destructive behavior, Jane is shocked, but not, in the end, disbelieving. She accepts that Wickham's behavior has been bad, though not without working through all possible other explanations. Lizzy's hard-headedness on this point wins the day in the end, and Jane must admit to the evil that Wickham has perpetrated. In contrast to her mother, who never seems to be able to give up a prejudice, Jane can change her

⁹ Austen, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Austen, p. 127.

¹¹ Austen, p. 74.

opinion on the basis of evidence. Her tendency is to believe others to have good intentions, but she uses her reason and will accept facts when they are clear.

Her father notes her intelligence as well. After the two elder sisters return from a trip, Mr. Bennet is grateful for their return, feeling the loss from the evening conversation of “much of its animation and almost all its sense, by the absence of Jane and Elizabeth.”¹² Jane wants all the world to be good and is ready to believe in people. When Lizzy vigorously claims that her friend Charlotte and the buffoonish Mr. Collins are a disastrous match, Jane is the one who brings calm to the conversation, insisting that Lizzy doesn’t know everything about their relationship and shouldn’t be so quick to judge. Jane is more correct than Lizzy on this point, and Lizzy revises her opinions on the marriage somewhat when she visits the Collins’ home.

As a final note on Jane’s character, when Wickham’s perfidy is finally exposed to Lizzy and then Jane, Jane insists that the sisters should not reveal the information to the neighborhood, because shooting down his reputation could keep him from reforming himself. Lizzy agrees, but for different reasons. She doesn’t want the trouble of trying to change people’s opinions when they are so set in favor of Wickham. Later, Lizzy regrets not publicizing his misdeeds but Jane does not. Her principles are unchanged: shooting down someone’s reputation would cement him in his badness, and that would leave no room for reform.

In Jane, we see the child born from the early affection of the Bennets. Mr. Bennet, recall, was captivated by Mrs. Bennet’s youth and beauty and fooled into thinking that good humor would be present as well. Early on, in his own foolishness, he doesn’t see the foolishness of his wife. Jane, springing from this phase of the Bennet marriage that is marked by affection, beauty, liveliness, the appearance of good humor, and naiveté, exhibits some of these traits herself. Jane, who is physically and morally beautiful, looks for moral beauty in everyone around her: ready to see goodness, ready to like everyone. When presented with stark evidence of bad behavior, she will reluctantly admit to it, but never gives up hope for moral reform. Unlike Mr. Bennet, she doesn’t lose hope; and unlike Mrs. Bennet, she is intelligent and teachable. Jane, who is clear-sighted about the

¹² Austen pp. 52-53.

possibility that she could be deceived, would rather risk deception and believe in the possibility of good.

Elizabeth Bennet

We get to know Lizzy the best of all the sisters. She and Darcy are the main couple around whom the action focuses, and hers is the main point of view given to the reader. She is lively, intelligent, a keen observer of people, and clearly her father's daughter. Like him, she is continually amused by the foolishness and folly of the people she encounters.

Lizzy places a high value on friendship and amiability. When Darcy insults her at the beginning of the novel by rejecting her as a dance partner –not to her face, but within range of her hearing – she feels the sting of the insult, but also revels in the absurdity of the situation. “She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous.”¹³ Later, when she encounters Darcy and his cousin at the Collins' home, she teases Darcy in the presence of his cousin, about his unwillingness to dance with anyone at that ball.

Her delight in the absurd is given free rein in her relationship with Collins, the inheritor of the Bennet estate and a “mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility”.¹⁴ She avoids being alone with him for as long as possible, because she knows that he has decided to propose marriage to her. Once she is forced to listen to him, though, she is torn between “distress and diversion” and nearly bursts out laughing at one point, as the pompous Collins describes being “run away with” by his feeling.¹⁵ She cannot respect him in any way because of his complete lack of good sense, but is not disgusted by him, so much as amused.

Things change when her best friend, Charlotte, ends up marrying Collins. Lizzy is dumbfounded at the news. She finds Charlotte's decision to accept his proposal disgraceful, and she loses esteem for her friend. It turns out that his foolishness is laughable until someone she cares about takes him seriously as a marriage prospect. Charlotte explains to Lizzy that she only asks for a comfortable

¹³ Austen, p. 12.

¹⁴ Austen, p. 61.

¹⁵ Austen, p. 91.

home and that she believes her prospects for happiness are as good as any. Charlotte has bound herself to a man of immense foolishness for the sake of comfort and security. In Charlotte's view, marriage is a kind of transaction in which companionship is agreed upon for the sake of security. Lizzy cannot agree with this view; it cuts against the grain for her. Despite her own parents' dysfunction, she holds marriage in high regard, as a partnership between two people who have affection for each other and, critically, who improve each other. She is therefore quite pained by Charlotte's decision to marry Collins, but after visiting them in their settled home, she comes away, if not favorable towards the marriage, then at least accepting that Charlotte has made the best of the situation.

Lizzy's opinion of marriage is also challenged by Wickham, who began showing a preference for Lizzy but later shifted his attention to a newly rich young woman, by the name of Miss King. Lizzy's horror at the way her friend Charlotte settles for a foolish husband out of pragmatic considerations is notably absent in her response to Wickham's turn towards Miss King based on what are clearly monetary considerations. Rather, Lizzy defends Wickham in a conversation with her aunt. Lizzy maintains that a young man must think of his living and that it is perfectly reasonable for him to pursue a relationship with Miss King. Her attitude towards him doesn't change until she finds out from Darcy just how mercenary Wickham is. Once she understands that he is essentially devoid of morals, she can only feel grateful for anyone who is spared marriage to him. When Lizzy's youngest sister Lydia tells her and her sisters that Miss King has been forbidden from marrying him, Lizzy is happy for the young lady. When Lydia cruelly dismisses poor Miss King as too ugly for him, Elizabeth was shocked to realize that she herself would have shared in Lydia's sentiments before learning of Wickham's character defects.

This moment is an interesting one for Lizzy. Throughout the novel, from beginning to end, she is routinely embarrassed by her family. In the episode recounted earlier in this lecture, when her mother, at the Netherfield Ball, talks loudly about Jane's prospects with Bingley, her mother is within earshot of Darcy, who clearly takes in the whole conversation. Elizabeth tries multiple times, in vain, to get her mother to quiet down. "Elizabeth blushed and blushed again with shame

and vexation.”¹⁶ At that same event, her sister Mary performs at the piano with ostentation and Elizabeth “was in agonies.”¹⁷ Her father, upon Lizzy’s hint, abruptly and rudely removes Mary from the pianoforte, and Lizzy is further chagrined at his ham-handed way of handling the situation. She also finds the scorn that Darcy’s and Bingley’s sisters have for her family intolerable. All this is in contrast to Lizzy’s father, who is explicitly said to “enjoy the scene”¹⁸ as her family is further embarrassing her. Lizzy is her father’s daughter to some degree, but her fierce love for her family may resemble her mother more than her father. She wants them to be respected and respectable. She cannot enjoy the scene of them exposing themselves to ridicule, even the ridicule of people she herself does not like. The moment when she realizes that she and Lydia had harbored similar coarse feelings toward Miss King comes at a time when she is beginning to realize that, however much she sees her family as liable to produce scorn and embarrassment, she herself is not immune from censurable folly.

This brings us to her relationship with Darcy. Throughout the first part of the novel, Lizzy and Darcy are living in two different worlds. While Darcy is falling in love, however reluctantly, with Lizzy, she is cementing her implacable hatred of him as a selfish man whose cold nature (as she believes) led him to destroy the prospects of Wickham, a man for whom Darcy was supposed to provide support. Elizabeth is determined to dislike him and even says as much to Charlotte, when Darcy has asked her to dance. When Charlotte suggests she might actually enjoy the dance, Lizzy says, “To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate! Do not wish me such an evil.”¹⁹

This tendency to lean into her bad opinion of people is in tension with her high opinion of marriage and desire to have her family be respected and esteemed. Twice, Lizzy is warned that her opinions are verging on the cynical. First, in a conversation with her sister Jane, Lizzy praises Jane’s virtue for refusing to pine over Bingley’s departure from Netherfield. When Jane disclaims any special virtue, Lizzy responds that Jane must allow her to extol Jane’s virtues. “There are few people whom I really love and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see

¹⁶ Austen, p. 86.

¹⁷ Austen, p. 87.

¹⁸ Austen, p. 89.

¹⁹ Austen, p. 78.

of the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and the little dependence that can be placed on either merit or sense.” Jane reproves Lizzy at this point, “My dear Lizzy, do not give way to feelings such as these. They will ruin your happiness.”²⁰ Jane, in her tendency to emphasize the good in people, sees the danger that her sister may fall into a dejected cynicism.

Later, Elizabeth’s Aunt Gardiner, a particular confidante of hers, says something similar. As the two are conversing, Lizzy gives in to her feelings of disappointment over Bingley’s departure from Jane. “I am sick of them all. Thank Heaven! I am going to-morrow where I shall find a man who has not one agreeable quality, who has neither manner nor sense to recommend him. Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing after all.” Her aunt warns her, “Take care, Lizzy; that speech savours strongly of disappointment.”²¹

In these two instances, Elizabeth is warned that she is in danger of falling into something like her father’s disappointment with life. As the second child of the Bennets’ marriage, one would imagine that she was born at a time when the Bennets are just beginning to realize that they are not as compatible as they had thought. Mr. Bennet was perhaps beginning an effort to correct his wife, after observing negative traits that he could not ignore, and perhaps Mrs. Bennet was beginning to feel peeved by his lack of responsiveness to her flights of emotion. As the child of this time in their marriage, Lizzy is appropriately hyper-observant of human follies and foibles, laughing at them when she can. She still loves her family, though, and doesn’t wish to laugh *at* them. She feels the pain of growing up with a ridiculous mother and takes family respect seriously. Jane and Aunt Gardiner both see that Lizzy might fall into the trap of disappointment with others that will, in Jane’s words, ruin her happiness. If Jane resists the temptation to protect herself by being suspicious of the motives of people who appear to like her, Lizzy’s temptation is the opposite: towards a cynical heart.

Mary Bennet

²⁰ Austen, p. 117.

²¹ Austen, p. 132.

The third child of the Bennets, Mary, is a moralizer. She is the sister considered least beautiful and the one who spends the most time with books. When Lydia is describing the pleasures of following the militia to Brighton, Mary says, gravely, "Far be it for me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasures. They would doubtless be congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess they would have no charms for *me*. I would infinitely prefer a book."²² I suspect many of us would sympathize with her on this point.

On other points, though, Mary has a tendency to be overly moralistic, to the point of not recognizing the humanity of the people around her. When Lydia and Wickham run off together and as the family are absorbing the fullness of the disaster, Mary quietly speaks to Lizzy about the solace they can take in musing on the moral lesson the situation provides. Though Lydia is in desperate straits, her plight teaches them how important a woman's reputation is, and how "one false step will involve her in irretrievable ruin."²³ This musing is all the more remarkable because Mary does, in fact, appear to be consoled in thinking of this and similar moral extractions. It seems that the messiness of life is too much for Mary, and that removing herself to the abstractions of moral lessons gives her comfort.

We see Mary's abstract rationality at work in many places throughout the novel. Within the first few pages, as Mr. Bennet is teasing his wife, he appeals to Mary to weigh in on the conversation. 'What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books, and make extracts.' Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how."²⁴

A few pages later, we see her able to say more. Mary it is, who spells out the difference between pride and vanity, a difference that becomes something of a theme throughout the novel as Elizabeth and Darcy, among others, struggle with finding the line between appropriate pride, inappropriate pride, and vanity. "'Pride,' observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, 'is a very common failing, I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and

²² Austen, p. 187.

²³ Austen, p. 240.

²⁴ Austen, pp. 8-9.

that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.”²⁵

Note that Mary has come to these conclusions “by all that I have ever read,” rather than from human experience. She is pretty good at reading books, but not so good at reading people. She disagrees, for instance, with Lizzy’s decision to walk three miles to see Jane, when Jane falls ill at Netherfield. “I admire the activity of your benevolence,” she says, “but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required.”²⁶ The outpouring of sisterly affection that is so natural to Lizzy, and even to Jane, is absent from Mary. Instead, she relies on her moral analysis based on what she has read.

It’s not surprising, therefore, that she is the sister who most takes to Mr. Collins. “[Mary] rated his abilities much higher than any of the others; there was a solidity in his reflections which often struck her, and by no means so clever as herself, she thought that if encouraged to read and improve himself by such an example as hers, he might become a very agreeable companion.”²⁷ She admires his solid reflections, by which she must mean his abstract moralisms, detached from common sense or human feeling. Collins, who, as Mary accurately notes, is less intelligent than she, comes off looking completely ridiculous again and again. Mary is sometimes ridiculous but mostly just seems out of touch and somewhat boring.

When Jane and Lizzy come back from Netherfield after Jane’s illness, “They found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature; and had some new extracts to admire, and some new observations of threadbare morality to listen to.”²⁸ “Thorough bass” is a musical notation technique in which the lowest line of vocal accompaniment is listed, along with certain notations

²⁵ Austen, p. 19.

²⁶ Austen, p. 29.

²⁷ Austen, p. 107.

²⁸ Austen, p. 53.

which indicate the chordal harmony that goes with the lowest note. This amounts to a sort of code that the keyboardist must interpret in order to accompany the vocalists. Mary, by studying “thorough bass and human nature” seems to put the interpretation of people on a level with the decoding of harmonies. Human nature, in her mind, is a puzzle to be solved using techniques that one can learn from academic study.

Musical performance is, for Mary, one realm in which she strays into the ridiculous. As much as she cogitates about pride and vanity, she cannot escape her own vanity, wanting to be seen as “accomplished” at music. We are told that she was always “impatient for display” but that she has “neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached.”²⁹ Anyone who has ever taken music lessons will have heard about the distinction between technical proficiency and musicality. Mary lacks musicality, that sense of the wholeness of the piece, the ability to enter into the music with her heart and soul. She tries, but her manner is “affected”. Thus, no one really wants to listen to her obvious efforts to put on a show. They’d rather listen to Lizzy, who doesn’t play well, but plays with heart. Mary’s hard-won technique falls on unappreciative ears.

Mary was perhaps born into another phase of the Bennets’ marriage, one in which the couple was starting to separate emotionally from each other. Mary’s habit of taking consolation in rationality may mirror her parents’ dealing with their disappointment in each other by distancing themselves from the messiness of human interaction. One might imagine Mr. Bennet beginning his practice of fleeing to his library around the time little Mary came into the world.

Catherine Bennet

Kitty is a follower. In her late teens, she is slight, delicate, and irritable. Our first encounter with her in the novel is when Mrs. Bennet tells her to stop coughing. Mr. Bennet, amused by the foolish request -- which seems to presume that Kitty has control over when she coughs -- says, “‘Kitty has no discretion in her coughs...she times them ill.’ ‘I do not cough for my own amusement,’ replied

²⁹ Austen, p. 23.

Kitty, fretfully.”³⁰ Not motivated by virtue, study, or rationality as are her older sisters, and not a particularly strong personality like her younger sister Lydia, Kitty is left adrift. Her irritability is a sign of displeasure with the world and indicates a sense of injustice, of being put upon by her family.

She finds her emotional home by following Lydia, the biggest personality in the house. Kitty is swept up into Lydia’s world of sociability. She goes to balls, gossips about the militiamen, and is devastated when it is too rainy to walk to town. When Lydia entertains the oldest sisters by recounting her and Kitty’s exploits, Kitty is always there as a sidekick, prodding Lydia on and adding details to fill in the story.

Kitty and Lydia are often lumped together in the narrative. Their minds are described as “more vacant than their sisters’”.³¹ The only thing they have learned to care about at a ball is whether they have partners for each dance. According to Mr. Bennet, they “must be two of the silliest girls in the country.”³² Their response to Mr. Collins’ introductory letter to Mr. Bennet at the beginning of the novel is described together: “neither the letter nor its writer were in any degree interesting.”³³ Throughout the main body of the novel, they are treated as something of a unit, with Lydia being the leader and Kitty the follower, but both described explicitly and implicitly as ignorant, idle, and vain.

This unity begins to dissolve when Lydia goes to Brighton with Colonel Forster and his young wife, a trip that had been imagined originally as something Kitty and Lydia would do together, in the company of their family. Bitterly disappointed that she cannot travel with Lydia, and deprived of Lydia’s company and natural leadership, Kitty falls into a slump, weeping with “vexation and envy.”³⁴ After several weeks, she finally begins to recover.

When Lydia and Wickham run off together, Kitty reveals that she had known about the attachment, after the fact, through a letter from Lydia. She is excited by Lydia’s news and her own inclusion in Lydia’s secret at first but soon

³⁰ Austen, p. 8.

³¹ Austen, p. 26.

³² Austen, p. 26.

³³ Austen, p. 56.

³⁴ Austen, p. 197.

feels the weight of the family's dismay and worry. Unlike the absent Lydia, she is regularly exposed to her mother's dramatic displays and is immersed in the family's fear of what will become of the two lovers if they are not persuaded to get married. The distance between Kitty and Lydia is exemplified in an exchange with her father, as Mr. Bennet flippantly refers to the possibility of Kitty also running away someday.

"I am not going to run away, Papa," said Kitty fretfully; "if I should ever go to Brighton, I would behave better than Lydia."³⁵ Mr. Bennet then hyperbolically threatens to keep her sequestered at home until she can spend her time more rationally. Kitty, who does not know how to read her father's mood, weeps. In the last pages of the novel, Kitty is slowly absorbed back into the family, no longer part of a unit with Lydia. We find out at the end that she spends most of her time away from her parents, living with the Darcys and Bingleys. With excellent examples of moral virtue and good sense to follow, Kitty is on the way to being saved by the final page.

Lacking agency and feeling unappreciated and ill-used, Kitty was likely born into a time of increasing disillusion in her parents' marriage. The Bennets, having passed through the happy early stages and having discovered that they are not compatible, were not sure where to turn. Kitty's peevishness may come from this penultimate stage in the Bennet's relationship, as they realized that the tendency to rationalize, as shown in Mary's character, was not helping, and slid further into disappointment.

Lydia Bennet

Her mother's favorite, the youngest Bennet daughter is the cause of much difficulty in the novel. We hear early on that "Lydia was a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humored countenance; a favourite of her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age. She had high animal spirits and a sort of natural self-consequence, which the attentions of the officers...had increased into assurance."³⁶ Her "high animal spirits" and "assurance" come out of the page at every moment.

³⁵ Austen, p. 249.

³⁶ Austen, p. 40.

When Mr. Collins is reading to the family from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, Lydia breaks in with a random piece of gossip about the militia, not even bothering to pretend that she had been listening to him. Though it is pretty clear that no one in the room was interested in Mr. Collins' reading, nor in Dr. Fordyce's advice to women, Lydia's rudeness is somewhat shocking.

After Mr. Collins' unsuccessful proposal of marriage to Lizzy, Lydia gleefully tells Charlotte, "I am glad you are come, for there is such fun here!- what do you think has happened this morning? - Mr. Collins has made an offer to Lizzy this morning and she will not have him."³⁷ Her excitement is on display, revealing her ultimate selfishness – Lizzy's pain, Mr. Collins' humiliation, and the family's disagreement over the whole thing are of no account to her, except as news she can use as gossip.

When Lizzy and Jane return from Jane's stay in London, Lydia and Kitty "treat" their older sisters to lunch, but don't have the money to pay and so Lizzy and Jane end up paying. The reason, we hear, is that Lydia has spent her money in town on a bonnet, which her sisters criticize as ugly. Completely unconcerned, Lydia says she'll just "pick it apart" at home and see what she can make of it.³⁸

She's impulsive, thoughtless, and completely secure in her sense of herself. Lizzy worries about Lydia when she goes to Brighton, both for Lydia's sake and for the impact her misbehavior might have on the reputation of the family. Lizzy warns her father not to let Lydia go to Brighton with Colonel Forster, but never envisions the possibility that Lydia will run off with Wickham, until it happens.

Imagine the episode with Lydia and Wickham as a larger--scale version of her purchase of the bonnet. With the bonnet, Lydia wastes her money on something ugly, doesn't have any regrets, and plans a way to make it right by working on it. In Wickham, she wastes her attention on a man who will never be able to support her, who doesn't think twice about ruining her reputation by living with her while having no plans to marry. By the end of the novel, we hear that, although they do end up marrying, the glamor of the relationship has worn off. As

³⁷ Austen, p. 97.

³⁸ Austen, pp. 184-185.

with the bonnet, Lydia doesn't regret or give up on the marriage, but works tirelessly to get handouts to support Wickham's debts.

Lydia and Wickham are the only people we hear of who are never redeemed by the Darcys. Even Darcy's thoroughly offended aunt, the arrogant Lady Catherine, eventually comes around to the powerful combination of grace, intelligence, and sheer goodness that the Darcys offer by the end of the novel. However, Wickham and Lydia seem unable to reform in any way. His profligacy and her thoughtlessness can only be contained and managed, with significant expense, by the Bingleys and Darcys.

There is something winning about Lydia's carefree approach to life, though. Unlike her husband, she is not a schemer. She wants to live life with gusto and has no patience for moralizing or self-control. She leaves a predictable path of destruction in her wake, and it's easy to be disgusted with her, but it's hard not to find something almost innocent in her single-minded, amoral approach to life, which leaves all thought of either the past or the future behind.

In Lydia, we see a reflection of the end stage of the Bennets' marriage, the stage at which they are portrayed in the time frame of the novel. By the time Lydia was born, Mr. Bennet had given up on any hope of having a truly loving relationship with his wife. He had given up rationalizing her behavior or trying to find the key to getting through to her. He made no effort to restrain her worst impulses. At this point, Mr. Bennet was content to use his wife for his own amusement, then avoid her when the amusement wore off. He exhibits no care for how their relationship and his wife's lack of both good sense and self-restraint might affect the future or their children until Lydia's escapade brings it home to him.

For her part, Mrs. Bennet has settled into being a slave to her own passions with her flights of self-aggrandizing emotion. Lydia resembles both of her parents to some degree: thoughtless of the future like her father, a slave to her own passions like her mother. She is less prone to show-stopping anxiety than her mother is, but also less caring. Mrs. Bennet, for all of her faults, genuinely wants the best for her children. Her idea of what is best is flawed, to be sure, but this care for her family is notable in the face of Mr. Bennet's attitude of avoidance and laziness.

Unsurprisingly, in this final self-centered stage, their marriage ceases to bear the fruit of offspring, and they are stuck without a son. Whatever may happen between them physically, there's no real, meaningful relationship there. They've reached the end of the line.

Summary and Conclusion

In the exquisite novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen gives us a panoply of marriages and families, while focusing on the main story of Darcy and Lizzy. In their story, love and good sense unite. Theirs is a marriage presented as morally uplifting, and productive of real joy for themselves as well as for nearly everyone around them, including the reader. With the Bennets, we get a very different and complex picture of moral formation and education; namely, through the characters of the young women who were born into that marriage and who were formed in childhood by the Bennets.

Because of the family's circumstances, they are very often living their lives in a complex interrelationships. Mr. Bennet doesn't spend large amounts of time in upper crust society or working for a living, as he might were he from a different social class. Mrs. Bennet doesn't farm out the girls' education to a stream of caretakers, as she might were she of a different temperament. The Bennet family lives and works together. In this crucible of an upbringing, one can imagine the importance of the marital situation on how the girls are formed.

The Bennet's marriage begins with beauty and naiveté, moves through various attempts to manage the relationship, and ends in exploitation and victimhood. It begins with the assumption that they will have a son and ends in procreative failure, the daughters in danger of being left destitute. The conceit of this lecture has been that each of the Bennet sisters was born into and formed by a different phase of their parents' marriage, so that the character of each child reveals something of what the parents were going through over time, distinct rings, as it were, in the trunk of the Bennet family tree.

Jane, the oldest, is beautiful and somewhat naïve, but is mostly marked by essential goodness. She errs on the side of being wrong about people rather than imputing evil to another. She's willing to be cheated but not to be unvirtuous, to suffer ill rather than to commit it. Lizzy, acutely aware of and amused by the faults

of others but unable to see her own, has high standards for marriage and people in general; the vitality of the novel stems from the realization of her high standards in the unlikely person of Darcy. Mary, the middle child, loves reason and lives through books and platitudes, jealous of attention but clearly avoiding the messiness of life. Kitty is irritable, searching for answers and finding them in whoever is the strongest personality around. Finally, the youngest sister, Lydia, is indulgent and indulged, living in the present for pleasure and the satisfaction of her own whims. She is not completely depraved, I would argue, because of her lack of duplicity, but she spends her life scrounging money to pay the debts of her scoundrel husband.

It is important to note that Austen is showing us not immutable caricatures but a moral spectrum: from the terribly good Jane to the simply terrible Lydia. The foundation laid by the Bennets' marriage is formative, but not completely determinative.

With the possible exception of Lydia, the characters are not stagnant, but undergo development. Real changes come as a result of real love and relationships, most notably Lizzy and Darcy's connection. By the end of the novel, their union bears much fruit. It leads to Lizzy's self-knowledge and reformation, as she realizes and abjures her own prejudices. It leads to Jane's marriage to Bingley, since neither the diffident Bingley nor the self-controlled Jane would have broken through the gulf between them without Darcy and Lizzy. Their union also leads to Mary's coming out of her shell, as she is forced to take care of her mother and to live in society without being overshadowed by her sisters. We also hear at the end of the novel that they rescue Kitty, by exposing her to good examples and taking on her education. And, though Lydia never really reforms, she and Wickham are supported by Jane and even somewhat by Lizzy, which allows her to coexist in society.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, we see a complex interplay of social interdependence, in which the foundation of the Bennets' collapsing marriage leaves its mark on the characters of the children raised within it. We also see the emergence of the Darcys' more fruitful relationship, which turns things around for nearly everyone. As we move into this semester, you might turn your eye upon your own character. What sort of roots have shaped you? How might your

encounter with the Great Books allow you to take moral extractions, as Mary so loved to do? When do you feel a lack of agency, like Kitty, or — perish the thought— fall into self-indulgence as Lydia does? Do you also have moments of goodness and beauty like Jane, or shocking moments where the veil of your own vanity is pulled aside, as Lizzy did? In our conversations both in and out of the classroom, I wish for you all the warmth and good humor that exudes from the pages of this sparkling novel, and the friendships that allow us to live life fully and fruitfully, to the betterment of our community.

Thank you.