

## The Other Bennet Sister: Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*

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No one cares about Mary Bennet. At least, in a cursory reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, she can seem more like a footnote to her sisters rather than a character in her own right. Most scholarly inquiry about the Bennet sisters focuses on Lizzy, Jane, and Lydia. Arguably, they are more important, because their relationships and struggles move the plot forward. Though Mary seems relegated to the footnotes, she is significant to the novel because she complicates the themes of social decorum. For all intents and purposes, Mary follows the rules of society to the best of her ability. However, she is made a failure in the context of the novel, ultimately staying at home with her parents and giving up the pursuit of "accomplishments." It seems that the novel is hypercritical of Mary, but her character becomes a fascinating commentary on how Georgian society fails women who are unattractive, untalented, and poor.

James Sherry postulates in his essay "*Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society*" that Austen "never introduces a character to be merely described [...] or because they fit into the action of the novel" (Sherry 613). Her characters work beyond a superficial level; they become important on a symbolic level. In this sense, Mary Bennet is not meant to be a footnote. Her symbolic purpose is to add to the conversation of how a particular type of woman is perceived in contemporary society. Mary "works hard for knowledge and accomplishments" because she is the plainest sister of the Bennet family; her acquirement of these skills is an attempt to set herself apart from her four sisters (17). Her lack of physical beauty and her constantly being compared to her sisters' beauty plays an important role in her attempts to be visible. In the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet begin to compare their daughters' physical and personality traits. "[Lizzy] is not half as handsome as Jane, nor half as good humoured as Lydia"

cries Mrs. Bennet when Mr. Bennet announces his preference for Lizzy (2). In doing this, the novel invites physical comparisons and an underlying competition between the sisters. Jane is considered the most beautiful—so beautiful that poetry has been written about her. Lizzy is found to be “equally in birth and beauty to Jane” by Mr. Collins (53). Lydia has a “fine complexion and a good-humoured countenance” (33). Kitty is so attractive that she is “fortunate to never be without partners” at the Meryton ball (8). Mary's defining feature is her lack of defining features: she is bestowed the title “the only plain one in the family” (17). It is Mary's plainness in comparison to her sisters that prompts her to pursue the socially accepted accomplishments of piano playing and being well-read as a means of visibility and to establish her personhood.

Mary's struggles in society because of her plainness are mirrored by Charlotte Lucas' plotline. Mrs. Bennet tells the Netherfield party that they “must own that Charlotte is plain” and that Charlotte's own mother Lady Lucas has “envied [...] Jane's beauty” (32). She marries Mr. Collins after Lizzy, Charlotte's beautiful friend, rejects him. Baffled at the news of their engagement, Lizzy pities Charlotte for having to marry the boring and odious Mr. Collins. However, Charlotte does not find her engagement born out of desperation as negative a situation as Lizzy finds it. She finds herself lucky that she married at all at her age, even if the marriage is not a match based on love, but of convenience and financial safety. In Charlotte's situation, there is the issue of when women are allowed choice. Lizzy, the pretty woman, makes the choice to reject him in search of a better situation. Charlotte does not get the same luxury due to her plainness and her age. Essentially, Georgian society allows women some room to choose their fate, but only if they are beautiful, young, talented, and—preferably—rich. As Charlotte and Mary have none of these attributes, society does not allow them choice.

Just as Charlotte accepts her fate happily, Mary submits to her fate just as easily. By the end of the novel, Mary has come to realize that she is not considered as beautiful as her sisters and this has been one of the reasons she has failed within the context of the novel. The end of the novel portrays Mary as a defeated woman, who has accepted her fate “without much reluctance” (290). She no longer is “mortified by comparisons between her sister’s beauty and her own” (290). Her motivational fire—to distinguish herself via talent and intellect instead of physicality—has been extinguished. Her self-awareness and resignation at the end of the novel are meant to be a commentary on the futility of hope for those women who lack talent, beauty, and money.

It is important to consider the position of women in Georgia society in conjunction with the major theme of friendship between sisters. The novel presents two major friend groups amongst the Bennet sisters: Jane and Lizzy, Lydia and Kitty. However, Mary does not have this sort of close friendship with any of her sisters. In fact, she struggles to connect with them. Mary, always pedantic and slightly condescending, fails to connect with her sisters, especially with Lydia, who “seldom listened to anybody for than half a minute and never attended to Mary at all” (166). It could be argued that Mary does not want the same sisterly friendship that her sisters have. She responds to Lydia’s invitation to go to Meryton to flirt with officers by saying, quite pedantically, “that she should infinitely prefer a book” (166). It is not impossible to believe that being ignored by her sister has affected her. Seeing that even being visible to her sisters is a formidable task, Mary Bennet begins to seek visibility outside of her family.

Mary Bennet most often seeks visibility amongst strangers through the display of her accomplishments, namely by playing the piano. In the essay “Object Association and Minor Characters in Jane Austen’s Novels,” Lesley Willis develops a theory that Jane Austen writes the

minor characters across her oeuvre in such a way that they become associated with one or two objects as a method of characterization. This form of characterization through object association serves the protagonists as well, adding another layer “to the moral climate in which the protagonist must function” (104). The objects that minor characters are associated with become a vehicle for characterizing both the minor character and the protagonist. For example, Lydia and Kitty are infatuated with the militia men, much like their mother was in her younger days. Lizzy’s brief infatuation with Mr. Wickham conveys that she is “not immune to the faults of her mother and younger sisters” (110). She too can develop irrational infatuations, instead of rational relationships.

Willis, however, neglects to mention Mary Bennet in her argument, which only serves to highlight the lack of critical thought about the forgotten Bennet sister. As a minor character, Mary Bennet becomes associated with one object in particular—her piano. On two occasions, Mary performs in the company of strangers--once at a gathering at Sir Lucas’s home and a second time at the Netherfield ball. The piano is an important symbol of social performance in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is while Lizzy is seated at the piano that Darcy utters “We neither of us perform for strangers” (122). The act of playing piano acts as a commentary on the nature of Georgian society and inclusion in this society demands both metaphorical and physical performance. Darcy and Lizzy’s share a temperament that causes them to deny social performance in favor of the truth of their personalities. Mary Bennet, on the other hand, intrinsically linked to piano performance in the text, performs as both a means to achieve the attention she desperately wants from Georgian society, but also as a foil to Lizzy. She "performs to strangers," setting herself apart from Lizzy, but in line with the society.

Austen crafts a novel that focuses on Georgian society's reaction to performance. Social decorum dictates what is proper behavior for particular spaces, such as a ball. Navigating the rules of social niceties makes or breaks a Georgian woman. Mary lacks this important skill, having little awareness of social cues. In Mary Ann O'Farrell's essay "Austen's Blush," she notes that it is Lizzy that feels embarrassment for Mary when she exposes herself at the Netherfield ball that Mary does not feel herself. O'Farrell writes that Mary does not feel the "social pressure" from her audience to stop playing and can only "manifest pleasures in display" (135). Meanwhile, Lizzy is "in agonies" listening to Mary's playing. She tries to signal to her to stop playing, but she does not understand her signals (Austen 76). In this scene, the reader's feelings align with Lizzy's feelings. As readers, we are meant to feel embarrassed for Mary at the self-exposure of her accomplishments. Not only because she remains unaware at how untalented she is, but also because her self-exposure makes her an embarrassment. In these moments of self-exposure, her presence reveals how different she is from her sisters. Her piano playing at Netherfield conveys an underlying irony about performance in Georgian society. Society dictates that Mary should pursue accomplishments and it the same societal pressure telling her that she should stop playing because she is only becoming an embarrassment.

The perception of Mary by the other characters of *Pride and Prejudice* reveals yet another facet of Georgian society. Caroline Bingley, an outsider in the neighborhood, acts as the litmus test of what it means to be an accomplished woman, because she creates the definition. Early in the novel, Caroline Bingley assumes this role. In the excitement over the new neighbors at Netherfield, Mary reveals that she has "heard herself mentioned to Miss Bingley as the most accomplished girl in the neighborhood" (Austen 8). As it is Caroline that gives the definition of an accomplished woman and Caroline who becomes Georgian society personified, the praise

given to Mary is significant. It gives Mary Bennet and the reader a false sense of security. For Mary, the pursuit of accomplishments, like playing the piano and studying, is a way to distinguish herself from her sisters. To be presented as someone who is accomplished to the woman who holds the power to decide whether one is accomplished or not is a cruel irony.

Austen's Georgian society crafts the idealized "accomplished woman" that Mary strives to be. The Accomplished Woman, begins Caroline Bingley, "must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages, [...] and must possess a certain something in her air, the tone of her voice, her address and expression..." (29). Lizzy objects to Caroline's, and by default, society's definition, believing it to be an unattainable goal. More than an unattainable goal, it is a way to systematically oppress women. Pursuing accomplishments becomes a form of oppression for these women, because their struggle to fit this definition is done for the sake of finding a husband. Mary seeks visibility, but it important to ask why she seeks this visibility. Though it is not explicitly said that Mary is seeking a husband, her wholehearted pursuit of accomplishments may be an indication of her desire to marry. Perhaps she only desires marriage because society presents it as one of the few options available to women at the time.

If there is an object in *Pride and Prejudice* that Mary Bennet is associated with other than the piano, it her books. Almost any time Mary is referenced in the novel, she is "deep in study" (45). She does not join her sisters on their walk to Meryton, preferring to stay at home reading. She presents herself as the intellectual of the family, despite her lack of formal education. In a conversation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Lizzy reveals that she and her sisters did not receive a formal education with a governess. Much of their education comes from being self-taught. Mary's obsession with studying and presenting herself as an intellectual woman

overshadows her need to learn critical thinking skills. Alistair Duckworth says that much of her observations seem to be from “rote memory” (Duckworth 135). She is a parrot only able to repeat information back to her family because she memorizes it.

Her mimicry is what makes her “silly and ignorant” in the eyes of her father (2). Her silliness comes from her inability to see that her observations are not her own thoughts. They are recited from her books. In his essay "Austen's Fools," John Lauber holds her up as the “Learned Fool” of *Pride and Prejudice* (516). Lauber postulates that any humor that the reader feels toward her character comes from the disparity of how she perceives herself as intelligent, but she is obviously not. Perhaps Lauber’s critique of Mary is too harsh. Certainly, she makes herself foolish when she attempts to be scholarly. By labeling her a fool offhandedly, Lauber silences Mary and perpetuates readings of her as a one dimensional character, instead of examining her importance to the themes of social decorum.

In her essay “Conjecturing Possibilities: Reading and Misreading Texts in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*,” Felicia Bonaparte looks specifically at Mary’s "intellectual" remarks. She finds that while the remarks Mary makes tend to be true, their *generality* is on what Austen is commenting. Her statements are produced by rote memory, parroted from her books. They are clichés, but she does not recognize they are empty, “quotable principles” (Bonaparte 147). Mary lacks the critical thinking that she must apply to her “quotable principles” to bring meaning to them. For example, after it is discovered by the family that Lydia has run away to marry Mr. Wickham, Mary tells Lizzy that there is a cautionary tale in Lydia’s hasty marriage—“that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable...and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior towards the undeserving of the other sex” (Austen 214). Lizzy is too shocked to respond to her sister’s cold and unfeeling moralizing. She only quotes what she has read (probably Mr. Collin’s

favorite—Fordyce's *Sermons*) without realizing the harshness of her words. She lacks the ability to think critically and adapt these principles to her life, thus making herself seem foolish. Being able to quote these principles would ideally make her a learned Georgian woman, but because she can only quote them she is not the learned woman she believes herself to be.

However, Mary seems to be somewhat aware of her failings, at least in the realm of intellectualism. When her father asks for her comment on the societal rules of visitation and introduction, she finds herself unable to generate a response. Perhaps she has not read a book on the nature of society and therefore has no prior information to cite. When asked to present her own thoughts on a subject, she is rendered speechless, “[wishing] to say something sensible, but [knowing] not how” (4). Her father considers her, along with Lydia and Kitty, to be “silly and ignorant,” a judgment that is mean-spirited, meant to highlight her ignorance, and aligning her with the sisters from whom she wants to set herself apart (2). Austen's highlighting of Mary's ignorance serves to highlight how society fails women like Mary. Instead of teaching critical thought and prioritizing thinking for oneself, they fall prey to the idea that knowing quotable information will make them intelligent.

Just as Mary is the only plain daughter in the family, she is the only sister that remains at home at the end of the novel. Of course, she is not the only sister that gets a mediocre ending. Lydia is stuck in a loveless and financially unstable marriage. Although Mary remains unmarried, it is the fact that she gives up the pursuit of accomplishments that conveys her failure, in the context of the novel. Her *raison d'être* was not finding a husband, but distinguishing herself from her sisters through her accomplishments. In the end, she is distinguished from them because she remains at home. It is assumed by her father that she submits to this change “with

little reluctance” (290). With her lack of marriage and her lack of recognition amongst her sisters, her spinsterhood commences.

Many characteristics of the "failed women" of *Pride and Prejudice* are found in Mary Bennet. Charlotte's rationality, Anne's plainness, and Caroline's pursuit of recognition—all of these qualities can be found in Mary's persona. Beyond similarities in personalities, these women are important to any critique of Mary Bennet because they are also considered failures based on the social decorum of purposed by the novel. Charlotte is confined to a loveless marriage for safety. Anne de Bourgh's long arranged marriage has been cut off due to Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth. (It is not explicitly stated what happens to her because of this, but one assumes that she remains her mother's charge, unmarried.) Caroline, a woman who spent much of her time in pursuit of Darcy's affection, has displaced her affection for Darcy onto Georgiana Darcy. She remains unfulfilled, because although she is “almost as attentive to Darcy as heretofore,” but she has not obtained his affection. These women are subtly punished by society for their lack of wealth, their unattractiveness, or their obsession.

In conclusion, at first it appears that *Pride and Prejudice* is unsympathetic to women who pursue accomplishments or seek visibility if they are not conventionally attractive, talented, and or wealthy. The suggestion is that women are only worthy of a happy ending if they fit this extremely limited mold of an Accomplished Woman, per Caroline Bingley's description. This is a rather bleak reading of the novel that Austen herself found to be too happy and lacking darker undertones. The apathy for these women and their failings is a comment on how Georgian society fails women who are not conventionally attractive, rich, or talented who try to achieve the same goals as other women. They do not fail society; society fails them.

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