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Mary Bennet, the Bennet's Dogsbody: Addressing the Forgotten Sister of *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Mary Bennet is one of Jane Austen's most shunned characters. She appears to be amongst the least popular of the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). As a result, there is little discussion of her character. In spite of that, Mary's particular personality can offer invaluable insight into Georgian society and offer new perspectives onto a novel that has been extensively commented upon. This TFG aims to showcase a wider understanding of Mary as a character who is marginalised both in the novel and by critics alike. Focusing on distinct topics such as education, family and the political situation of the English Regency, this paper aims to highlight the relevance of an otherwise almost-forgotten character.

Keywords: Mary Bennet, education, family, social class, conduct books

0. Introduction

Jane Austen is one of the most popular and celebrated authors in English Literature. She was born on the 16th of December of 1775 as the last of seven siblings. Her family was of relatively modest means, and although it was expected of her, she never married. The income she received from the publication of her novels along with her family's support allowed her to be economically independent, quite a feat for women in Georgian Britain's middle-class society. It is possible, in a certain sense, that Jane Austen inherited her talents from her mother Cassandra Leigh, described as an educated woman, a good writer and member of an old prosperous family. In her biography of Austen, Lucy Worsley describes Mrs. Austen as "a powerful personality. She had 'strong common sense, wrote a relative, an 'often expressed herself, both in writing and in conversation, with epigrammatic force and point'. But these were not necessarily attractive qualities in a Georgian woman" (Worsley, 2017: 11).[1] Jane's mother could also have been the inspiration for the character of Mary, perhaps due to the rejection of educated women—and thus her mother—by most Georgian standards. One of the most central topics in Jane Austen's novels is women's place in society, their limitations and duties. That is most likely why most of her female characters face the possible loss of their home to a male relative, as is the case, for example, in *Pride and Prejudice* and (1813) *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Even nowadays, more than two-hundred years later, her work is still very relevant. There have been numerous adaptations and editions of her work and there is no sign that there will be any change in that regard. *Pride and Prejudice* is amongst the most popular works in English literature; as such there are countless papers, books and articles about its many themes, issues and characters. However, there is a notable lack of

[1] For further details on Jane Austen's life, see for instance Worsley's *Jane Austen at Home*, or Butler's *Jane Austen*.

material regarding Mary Bennet, the Bennet's middle sister, forgotten both by her family and critics alike. There is a plethora of work regarding Elizabeth and significant discussion of Jane and Lydia.[2] However, there is a distinct lack of material on Mary, who has been brushed over and largely ignored since the onset of critical studies on *Pride and Prejudice.*

Most of the material that focuses on Mary dates from 2000 onwards, although she started to be more frequently mentioned in the 1990s, in earlier publications she is usually referred to only briefly and the opinions regarding her quite similar. In 1965 in his article "Pride, Prejudice and Vanity in Elizabeth Bennet", Dooley mentions Mary to comment on her distinction between pride and vanity so that he can compare that section to Elizabeth's predicament throughout the novel. There is only one comment he makes in regard to Mary, which is the argument that "Mary's definition of vanity does not seem to Jane Austen's". That comment, however difficult it might be to actually establish Austen's own view of such things, does not seem to say much about Mary herself, and is in line with the common consensus about Mary, which is that she differs from Jane Austen's ideals and that, as Lauber argues in his article "Jane Austen's Fools", she is indeed one of those fools. Mary has been defined in mostly unkind terms and only recently, when the other members of the Bennet family have started to be questioned, has she become a more redeemable character.

The main aim of this project is to shed more light onto Mary's character by attempting to answer what Austen, or—more specifically—her narrator, is trying to imply with the character of Mary Bennet. Due to the complexity of the topic, I would like to

[2] Some examples are: Allen's article "No Love for Lydia: The Fate of Desire in Pride and Prejudice", Stoner's Article "Pride and Potentiality: Doubling Elisabeth Bennet" or Fox's article "Elisabeth Bennet: Pride or Vanity?", amongst others. The complete reference can be found in the bibliography.

approach this subject by addressing the following four elements: In what ways and why does the narrator constantly marginalise Mary Bennet? Might this reflect a broader criticism on conduct-book education and its perceived consequences? Can Mary be incorporated into a political reading of *Pride and Prejudice*? And how does Mary's treatment at the hand of certain main characters undermine our sympathy for those characters? By assessing these issues, I hope to be able to propose a fuller answer to the meaning of Mary than that which is usually found in most critical sources.

1. Women's Education and Conduct Books

The debate about women's education was particularly ongoing during the late 18th century. At the centre of this debate were conduct books. Their objective was to instruct young women to be virtuous and proper. Conduct books aimed to prepare women to fulfil their duty as mothers and wives. There are, of course, several different views on women's education and some of them seem to merge in *Pride and Prejudice*. Amongst the most conservative, such as Fénelon, there was the belief that: "A woman's intellect is normally more feeble" (Barnard, 1966: 1). However, he argued that education was necessary for women in order to be able to manage their households and educate their children. Horwitz, in her article argues that according to Locke, "the basic goals of education must be virtue, wisdom, breeding and learning, in that order […] Jane Austen agreed with them, that one important manifestation of virtue consists of doing one's duty." (Horwitz, 1994: 136) Regardless of their standpoint, female's education was viewed as a necessity, even if Locke's sense of duty and virtue go beyond housekeeping. There is, undoubtedly, no trace of the belief of women's inferiority in *Pride and Prejudice*. That is showcased by Elizabeth's acclaimed wit and Mr. Collins infamous foolishness. Fools are characterised by their actions and beliefs rather than by their gender. Moreover, some of those who believed that women should be educated argued that "women should not be encouraged to learn but they might be permitted to do so if such study did not interfere with their household duties and if they made no attempt ever, to display their knowledge" (Horwitz: 1991, 61-62). There was a common conception that knowledge would make a woman vain and pedantic. There is a consensus amongst writers on education that a "bookish gentlewoman" or a pedant was generally disliked, even amongst women writers, although they very often fell into this same group of learned women. The worst fault was that of exhibiting knowledge. Silence was often recommended to females: "conduct book

authors certainly do not want young women to be passionately eloquent and outspoken […] conduct books prefer their readers to hold their tongue and exert a certain kind of self-censorship, but to speak up, if it is a moral duty to do so." (Dahmer: 2016) Certainly, women's silence was not only encouraged due to the belief that men found silly women attractive; additionally, it helped make women less threatening to the status quo. There are three examples of this in *Pride and Prejudice*, which do not necessarily align with the general and conservative consensus. Elizabeth is a prime example of a passionate, witty and outspoken woman and unlike what was firmly believed, that is what draws Mr. Darcy towards her. The second example is Mrs. Bennet, a fine example of a silly woman, and in her prime, beautiful. Mr. Bennet was drawn to her by that beauty, and perhaps by her silliness too, but their marriage failed due to their incompatibility. Mary is the prime example of a quiet girl; there are not many instances in which she speaks freely. However, when she does, she often tries to apply extracts of books she has read to the conversation. Her drive to publicise her knowledge would make her unlikeable and uncouth to the majority of writers on education.

Mary is antagonised and compared with her sister Elizabeth from the beginning of the novel. The narrator's comparisons between the sisters are used to highlight the accepted and correct behaviour, from the narrator's perspective.

> Mary had 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. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well; and Mary, at the end of a long concerto, was glad to purchase praise and gratitude" (Austen 29-30).

The difference between Elizabeth and Mary, as the narrator describes it, is the modesty in the way they reveal their accomplishments. There is no attempt to silence women or to glorify silly women in *Pride and Prejudice*, quite the opposite. Horwitz

argues that "Mary Bennet represents the conventional fear of what literary knowledge could do to a young woman. […] She is more dazzled than enlightened by what she knows." (Horwitz: 1991, 63). Mary is not shamed for her thirst for knowledge and reading; if that was the case, Elizabeth would be criticised as well. Nonetheless, the narrator suggests that her motivation for self-improvement is not genuine, but rather a vain attempt to collect praise and make herself desirable or superior. That behaviour is generally criticised amongst writers on education. Mary longs to display her talents, or as the narrator would argue, her lack thereof. One of the infamous instances in which she displays herself is at the Netherfield ball. The narrator expresses how "an opportunity of exhibiting was delightful to her, and she began her song […] Mary's powers were by no means fitted for such a display; her voice was weak, and her manner affected" (Austen, 115-116). Lauber argues that "the fool has no hesitation in displaying himself or in prolonging the exhibition as far as possible." (Lauber: 1974, 516). However, Mary's need for recognition and display is justified by the narrator, who argues that "in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, [Mary] worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, [and] was always impatient for display." (Austen, 29). Her need for recognition is always made worse by the constant comparisons established between her and her sisters. In fact, her sisters are the main obstacle between herself and marriage. This is the case with Mr. Collins, as he prefers to set his eyes on the two older and more beautiful sisters instead of Mary, who actually has a far more similar disposition to his and who "might have been prevailed on to accept him." (Austen, 143-144).

Horwitz argues that more liberal authors on the topic of women's education, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the Edgeworths,[3] indicated that pedantry amongst other

3 Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth argue about the subject of women's education in their book *Practical Education*, "Chapter XX On Female Accomplishments, Masters and Governesses" deals with the topic of women's education directly.

women's faults were a result of a faulty education and would disappear with proper training. There are certainly indications of the lax nature of the Bennet's education by the standards of the time. Lady Catherine is flabbergasted at Elizabeth's admission of their lack of a governess:

> "Then, who taught you? who attended to you? Without a governess, you must have been neglected." "Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might." (Austen, 188)

Mary is flawed because she lacks a proper education. Regardless of Elizabeth's claim that they had access to "all the masters that were necessary" (188), Mary does not reflect this in her behaviour. Mary had the means to acquire knowledge but lacked the proper guidance to achieve an understanding of those things she was learning about. The narrator argues that she is unaware of things and given to moralising even when she does not fully comprehend the lessons she is giving. Fordyce, like other contemporaries argued that women should not be encouraged to read. He was part of a belief system holding that knowledge made a woman vain and unattractive. Additionally, he believed women should not be grave and moralising, as Mary often is. The common consensus was that if a woman was indeed knowledgeable, she should hide it and never display it. This is one of the main reasons why the narrator constantly criticises her. However, she is not entirely at fault for that. Her guidance, as shown in the novel, is based upon conduct books, described by the narrator as a source of "threadbare morality." (Austen, 69) Conduct books by themselves are insufficient to procure a young woman's education. That is illustrated by Mr. Bennet's cruel and mocking remark towards his daughter: "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 sensible, but knew not how." (Austen, 9)

Mary through her studies alone is not capable of articulating her knowledge in a sensible way, and often misunderstands or incorrectly applies the knowledge that she has acquired.

Good nature versus self-knowledge is at the core of the story in *Pride and Prejudice*. Authors on education argued about the importance of good nature. Horwitz explains that, on one hand, good nature was believed to be determined to some extend before birth but could be affected by education. On the other hand, self-knowledge is the capacity of each individual to know themselves. *Pride and Prejudice* revolves around the journey of self-discovery that Elizabeth undergoes throughout the novel, which points out the importance of self-knowledge above good nature. Horwitz argues that "the difference between the admirable and less admirable characters in the novels consists in the fact that the less than admirable characters do not only misjudge others, they never know themselves." (Horwitz: 1991, 106) Elizabeth experiences growth as a result of the discovery of her own faults and prejudices as she admits to herself when she states "Till this moment I never knew myself." (Austen, 239). On the contrary, Mary never becomes self-aware. The combination of factors that mark her at fault demonstrates a lack of self-knowledge at its core.

2. Family

Mary Bennet is mostly forgotten or disregarded by her family, most notably, she is censured by her family for her behaviour; and yet not one of them does anything to help her correct her behaviour. The conventional role of educator would fall firstly to Mrs. Bennet and secondly to Mr. Bennet.

Mrs. Bennet, as mother, is traditionally responsible for her daughters' education. The most common perception about her is that "Mrs. Bennet is stupid and ill-bred, so much so that she endangers her own dearest-scheme – getting her daughters married." (Horwitz, 1991, 121) Nonetheless, she seems to be far more aware of what would secure a comfortable future for her daughters than her husband does. Even if due to her clear preference amongst her children she can be seen as a flawed mother, she is by all means very concerned about their general well-being. She is described as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. […] The business of her life was to get her daughters married." (Austen, 6). Although she is indeed a silly woman, she is nevertheless very aware of her social reality: the only way her daughters can survive is through marriage. The comedy in her character reflects this harsh reality for women but because of her silliness, she is not taken seriously. However, it is also true that although she has good intentions, her actions often drive away possible matches for her daughters. Additionally, because of her own faults she has neglected her daughters' education; this in turn has made them less desirable.

Mr. Bennet is the prime example of a flawed character. On the first reading of the novel, we are inclined to regard him as a sympathetic, caring father who saves his daughter Elizabeth from a loveless marriage. However, upon closer inspection he is a man of many faults.

Mr. Bennet has a self-serving disposition. As Fay indicates in her article: “Mr. Bennet troubles himself hardly at all about the needs of his daughters, especially their precarious situation under the entail; he lives almost entirely for his own present pleasures.” (Fay, 2001). Mr. Bennet, as if cheated by the lack of male heirs and his disillusionment with his marriage to a “silly woman”, closets himself in his study in an attempt at escapism. Arguably, he acts as a good father to his two first daughters, as he is shown to be considerate and loving towards them. However, it can also be argued that, as his hopes of having a son perish so does his loving disposition towards his daughters, taken as a whole.

That is clearly shown in his contempt towards Mary. He rarely talks to her and when he does it is usually to mock her. Whilst it is true that Mary is not given a Cinderella-like treatment, it is also the case that she is emotionally abandoned by her family. She has no-one to relate to: her sisters do not form a close bond with her as they do with each other; her mother’s character is nothing like hers; and her father, who has a character that actually does somewhat resemble her own, has abandoned all parental duties out of his own disillusionment and self-centred despair. Without a second’s thought “he dismisses Kitty, Lydia, and Mary, as “‘three very silly sisters’” (232).” (Fay, 2001). It seems that although he is quick to make judgements about his children he does not get involved in their education. Elizabeth describes their education in the following way, “We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might.” (188). It is true that fathers were not usually involved in their children’s education, especially women’s education, or at least not greatly so; that was a role reserved for mothers. However, Mr. Bennet should have taken action when it became obvious that the behaviour of his wife and children was hindering their chances of achieving a secure position through marriage. It was not a father’s duty to educate his

daughters, but it *was* his duty to protect them and to ensure their security and prosperity. Rather than mocking Mary for being vain about her knowledge and her perpetual striving to showcase her abilities, he ought to have taught her how to avoid acting vainly. If he believed his children were silly, he should have procured a better education for them. There are many things that Mr. Bennet could have done; and yet he does none.

Another issue with what might be called the *mechanics* of the Bennet family is the lack of moral support. Of the five daughters, Jane and Elizabeth frequently team up, as do Lydia and Kitty. Mary is left alone and is subject to the disdain and contempt of her sisters. Elizabeth acts as the protector of her sisters but does not extend this to Mary. In the Netherfield Ball, when Mary is performing, and by their standards wrongfully displaying herself, Elizabeth:

> "… looked at her father to entreat his interference, lest Mary should be singing all night. He took the hint, and when Mary had finished her second song, said aloud, "That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit." Mary, though pretending not to hear, was somewhat disconcerted; and Elizabeth, sorry for her, and sorry for her father's speech, was afraid her anxiety had done no good." (Austen, 116).

Elizabeth's intentions can be considered good, since she stops her sister from further exhibition, but her actions are also selfish since she wants to avoid her own embarrassment. Elizabeth feels sorry for her sister and is aware of her faults, but she does not act in order to help her, as she does with her other sisters. The heroine intervenes to secure a marriage for her sister Jane, tries to stop Lydia's departure to Brighton and then at the end of the novel, takes Kitty in and guides her towards better marriage prospects. Presumably, she does all of this out of sisterly feelings. But Elizabeth, as a heroine, does not do the same for Mary. She never vocally reproaches Mary herself; either she simply says nothing or has her father talk to her. Additionally, she does not take her in as she does with Kitty. Elizabeth's treatment of Mary makes her seem the kind of character who does not like to trouble herself with individuals that do not meet her expectations. Jane,

well-regarded as she is, does not really interact with any of her sisters other than Elizabeth, she is a passive agent just watching the story unfold. Kitty is usually presented as Lydia's shadow and Lydia "never attended to Mary at all" (Austen, 254).

The ending of the novel does give hope in regard to the relationship between Mary and her parents, and in turn as regards their attention to her and her education.

> Mary was the only daughter who remained at home; and she was necessarily drawn from the pursuit of accomplishments by Mrs. Bennet's being quite unable to sit alone. Mary was obliged to mix more with the world, but she could still moralize over every morning visit; and as she was no longer mortified by comparisons between her sisters' beauty and her own, it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change without much reluctance. (Austen, 436)

At first glance, we see that the situation with her sisters has remained the same. However, she is "no longer mortified by the comparisons between her sisters" (Austen, 439). In that regard, Mary no longer has any competition in her own home. She does not have to compete with her siblings, because they are either married or, in the case of Kitty, are staying in Elizabeth's home. The lack of comparison between her sisters and herself would also suggest that she does not have to try so hard to impress potential partners with her accomplishments. Without her sisters, she is no longer less beautiful than Elizabeth or Jane nor less lively than Kitty or Lydia; she is fine just being herself. Additionally, "she was necessarily drawn from the pursuit of accomplishments by Mrs. Bennet", regardless of the reason, presumably because her mother is "quite unable to sit alone", and so she will very likely benefit through more direct attention from her parents. It is additionally very likely that, with less time to practice and read, she will also be less likely to be so eager to display what she has learned. Since most criticism she receives is from her yearning for display, that alone would possibly go a long way for her. Most importantly, however, is Mr. Bennet's reflection about Mary's feelings, admitting that "she submitted to the change without much reluctance". This tends to suggest that perhaps

Mary is happier being taken care of and not being constantly put down by comparison with her sisters. Mary, not surprisingly, seems to call out for more love and care, and for far less reproach. It might be unlikely that Mrs. Bennet will ever be able to provide a wonderful education, since she is believed to be a silly woman herself. Nevertheless, Mary's life must very surely improve by the changes brought on through the marriages and removal from home of sisters Lizzy, Jane and Lydia.

3. Political Reading

During the English Regency, the Bennet sisters were not the only ones lacking a proper father figure. The same can be applied to the British nation under the regency and eventual reign of George IV. George IV was described as "nothing but a coat, and a wig, and a mask smiling below it" (Baker: 2005, 31). As far as failed *patres familias* are concerned, Mr. Bennet and George IV are rather evenly matched. The similarities between these two characters are not only limited to the lack of guidance they offered to their family, real or extended. George IV and Mr. Bennet share a similar fate regarding their marriages. Both men married for wrong reasons and as a result had disastrous marriages. George IV married Princess Caroline essentially so he could pay the astronomical debts he had amassed. Mr. Bennet married Mrs. Bennet because of her good looks and, perhaps, silliness. Those qualities were alluring to him as a young man, but they were incompatible with his own disposition over the years. George IV was generally disliked; Jane Austen was amongst those who did not have a high esteem for the regent. Le Faye presents one of Jane Austen's letters to Martha Lloyd in which Jane expresses how she pitied Princess Caroline (the Prince Regent's wife) and how she hated Caroline's husband. George IV was the kind of man that could easily have inspired Wickham's character, a gambler, womanizer, glutton and, in all, a very wasteful man. And whilst Mr. Bennet does not show any of those traits, both men—Mr Bennet and the Prince Regent—immersed themselves in their own follies without any regard to their broader responsibilities. Similarities could also be drawn between Mrs. Bennet and Princess Caroline: both had bad relationships with their husbands and often acted on whims.

Drawing parallelisms between Britain and the *mechanics* of the Bennet family could plausibly lead to an exploration of social class represented by each of the Bennet's sisters. In the Georgian era, women established their social status through marriage. That

is the case with Elizabeth, Jane and Lydia. By the end of the novel, each of them ends up in a very different position in society, which at the time was becoming increasingly shaped by issues of affluence rather than of birth. Another factor to take into consideration in locating the social status of each character is Mr. Bennet's regard for each of his daughters, which (in this reading) would also align with the monarchy's treatment of each social class. First, let us consider Elizabeth and Jane, the only daughters Mr. Bennet does not regard as fools. They are also the ones who achieve a higher social status than any of their family. This might be interpreted as the favour of the monarchy and country towards the upper classes and the growing bourgeoise. Second, Mr. Bennet's 'fools', Lydia, Mary and Kitty. Lydia is the only one of the three who has a set status by the end of the novel. Unlike her sisters, she has married a man of little affluence, which would locate her in the lower middle class. By the end of the novel, Kitty has acquired better marriage prospects due to escaping from Mr. Bennet's mindlessness and through the influence of her two elder sisters. So even if Kitty has not yet married, her future is hopeful. The only discrepancy in the family, therefore, is Mary. All her sisters have either to improved or else worsened their social status. Those are traits that, read politically, could be attributed to the middle and upper class. Social mobility was becoming far more frequent, as seen with the rise of the middle class, in part through the Industrial Revolution. However, unlike any of her siblings, Mary remains the same throughout the novel; she seems to be unable, by the narrator's standards, to improve her prospects. This could be explained by Lauber's view: "Jane Austen's fools are not Society, as a satirist might imply; rather, they constitute a sub-society of their own which sensible people avoid when possible". (Lauber: 1974: 518). Through these parallels I would suggest that Mary, the only one lacking social mobility, can be understood as sharing similarities with the working class, which remains fixed at the bottom of the pile. Additionally, there seems to be an effort to

have her remain invisible, which might be comparable to the complete lack of working-class representation in the novel. Mary, like the working class, is forgotten and marginalised by the other members of the family.

The ending of the novel is consistent with this interpretation. "Mary was the only daughter who remained at home" (Austen, 436), as previously mentioned, she has remained constant throughout the novel, unlike her siblings; there appears to be no indication of improvement or decline. Moreover, the ending describes (as we have seen) how Mary "was necessarily drawn from the pursuit of accomplishments by Mrs. Bennet's being quite unable to sit alone" (Austen, 436). Mary abandons an activity, which she in all probability enjoys, to entertain and accommodate her mother. It has been previously established that, in this interpretation, Mrs. Bennet would align with the role of royalty, as the King's consort. Thus, Mary's indulgence could be understood as a representation of working-class obedience and subservience towards the crown. To further support this claim, Mr. Bennet observes that "she submitted to the change without much reluctance" (Austen, 436). That is, the working-class, as Mary with her parents, is at the mercy of the power elite and must comply with all of their whims.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this discussion was to highlight the relevance of Mary Bennet's character and thereby to attempt to uncover the implications behind her character, providing a different perspective to conventional views. Several questions were introduced at the outset. Why and how is Mary marginalised by the narrator and how can that reflect on conduct-book education? How does the study of Mary influence our sympathy towards other characters? Lastly, can Mary be incorporated into a political reading of the novel? These questions have been answered through analysis of both the primary text and of relevant critical sources.

Mary is marginalised because she wants to showcase her talents. Her need to display is a result of unrelenting comparison between her sisters and herself. In her understandable pursuit for recognition (given a social context in which women were effectively obliged to show their 'value' as marriageable objects), she fails to see that her overly vulgar behaviour is frowned upon by the people in her surroundings and indeed by most of the conduct-books she has based her learning on. Conduct books aim to teach women how to perform their duty as mothers and housekeepers, and in many instances fail to provide a broader education. Mary, by attempting to imitate and follow the moral code of conduct books, becomes a pedant, precisely what conduct books fear women might become. The failure of conduct-book education in Mary's case seems to suggest that such books are insufficient and unsuitable for a woman's proper education, and this may indeed be part of Austen's message through this character.

Mary's failed education also reflects her family's failures and reveals their own faults. Mr. Bennet fails as the protector of the family because he is swept away by his own concerns and follies. Whilst he is not responsible—in terms of his own society's

understanding—for his daughters' education (since that role was most commonly attributed to mothers), he is still his daughters' protector. He fails in that role by remaining passive, at the cost of his daughters' security. Mrs. Bennet, in contrast and despite her silliness, tries to procure security for her daughters. However, even if she has good intentions, her behaviour also has a negative impact on her daughters. A closer inspection of Mary not only raises doubt about her parents; her sisters, with whom she has had to share their parent's scarce attention, form links among each other but never with her. Mary appears to be isolated in the midst of a large family. Elizabeth is the most questionable character in that regard. The heroine, who generally intervenes throughout the novel to aid her sisters, actually does nothing at all for Mary. However, by the end of the novel, there is still some hope for Mary. She remains in her parents' home, enjoying their undivided attention, now no longer the object of insistent comparison between her sisters and herself.

The analysis of the *mechanics* of the Bennet family allows the formulation of a political reading of the novel. By establishing links between the hierarchy of the Bennet family and the elite power structure of contemporary Britain, as a society separated by social classes and led by a figurehead, my discussion facilitates the possibility of categorising and interpreting the members of the Bennet family by the social rank that they can be understood to represent. Through this interpretation, the Prince Regent (the future George IV) and Mr. Bennet—as the respective *patres familias*—represent the executive levels of society and family. Mrs. Bennet can also be considered part of this group. All the Bennet sisters show qualities of the middle and upper classes either by their ability to improve or worsen their status. Mary is the only one of the Bennet sisters who does not show these qualities. She is invisible and incapable of improvement, similar to the working-class. The ending of the novel reinforces this idea by confirming Mary's

immovability and her obedience to her parents, corresponding to working-class social rigidity and a compliance with the status quo that is, in effect, obligatory.

This research has been limited by a lack of critical resources on the topic of Mary. There is, very clearly, still a need for further research into the Bennet sisters (other than Elisabeth). And even though Jane and Lydia are commented upon more often in critical sources, Kitty and especially Mary have received far less attention, in spite of the fact that closer assessment of their 'meaning' throws up challenging news ways of understanding the novel, its characters and even its author.

In conclusion, Mary is far from being a one-dimensional bluestocking; she is a character who brings to light many contemporary aspects regarding the often very limiting expectations of women's behaviour and education in the Georgian era and, more specifically in regard to the novel itself, of the complex family relationships established amongst the Bennets.

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