"Such a Quantity of Merit": The Construction of the Ideal Woman in Pride and Prejudice

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“Such a Quantity of Merit”:
Fractions of the Ideal Woman in *Pride and Prejudice*

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“Such a Quantity of Merit”:
Fractions of the Ideal Woman in Pride and Prejudice

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When we understand those times when women’s options for personal fulfillment and beautiful lives were constituted almost exclusively by marriage and family, without other options, “having it all” can look like having less. Those marriages every woman needed can so easily appear commonplace, and can hardly seem a fit subject for an artist like Jane Austen. But *Pride and Prejudice* must forever remain an alluring and comforting presence in the face of these appearances. In the legendry of “marriage plots,” the story of the Bennet sisters and their pursuits of husbands and fortune testifies compellingly in favor of making the business of marriage into a vital and heroic quest--far from commonplace--even in times which would boast of liberating women from it.

As such testimony, *Pride and Prejudice* further distinguishes itself by the wise elegance of its warning: that, among other things, our prides and our prejudices can easily and often shutter our view of the person for whom we may be destined. Austen’s characters’ difficulties remind us that seeing clearly the merits of another is every bit as great a task as having merits to be seen. This conflict is beautifully resolved in the end of the novel; Elizabeth and Darcy are each humbled against pride or enlightened against prejudice so that they seem to deserve each other, to get what they deserve, and to live happily ever after. Questions of character and destiny seem to be answered. But those questions the novel retains are about the merits, or character values, or ‘valuables’ (as I like to refer to them) themselves. What qualities were gathered in the *ideal* woman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century?

I confess that I’ve deliberately tried to make the question sound posterior to a discussion of more appealing elements of this favorite story: its indelible characters, razor-sharp language, and
a plot sensitive to the throes of life. After all, one has only to look away to ladies’ conduct books to get a fairly clear, if contradictory, picture of the ideal. That question hardly involves the novel. I ask it, however, because it’s precisely by asking for the components of this ideal in the context of Pride and Prejudice’s characters, language and plot that a new discussion of this old and favorite story will begin. All these and all other aspects of Pride and Prejudice are automatically, intricately, stitched onto a day-and-age fabric that also includes the unattainable, extravagant composite who is the ideal woman. The people Pride and Prejudice contributes to that tapestry need not lay “flat” to be pitied or lauded, nor stand “round” and march through their paces to self-correct some gross, but temporary flaws, but are characters who happen simply to be created in a culture that allows Austen to represent them in certain ways.¹

I hope my discussion will transcend the labels of “flat” and “round” for the simple reason that character-based criticism of Pride and Prejudice or any marriage plot can easily focus on plot as the process of education for its heroines—the “humbling and enlightening” that soften the effects of the title’s “pride” and “prejudice.” Critics have made excellent use of this model, as Alistair Duckworth does when he argues that the “gulf impassable” that stands between Elizabeth and Darcy is a reflection of the one between social class ranks. In that reading, the novel answers the question of how to bridge the gap precisely as I’ve predicted, through the “education of the

¹These terms are to be found in E. M. Forster’s famous analysis, Aspects of the Novel, in the chapter entitled “People,” section I. The beginnings of my thoughts on character in Austen’s novels sprang largely from his work, since, using as an example Lady Bertram from Mansfield Park, (of all people) he decides that all Austen’s characters are round, or “capable of roundity” (74). “Roundness” described so, as universal, made me wonder if a certain amount of “flatness” might be present in all the characters as well.
hero and heroine, whose union is not only to their mutual advantage, but brings together widely separate outlooks and social positions” (Norton 313-314). Though Duckworth also praises the “mutuality of the concessions” the lovers make, in a kind of text that is written primarily from the heroine’s viewpoint, such readings have room to wrangle with twentieth-century notions of a female self. Finding a novel of education within a marriage plot suggests that these heroines must successfully navigate the marriage market, and “land a man” before they can find wholeness. In looking past Elizabeth’s courtship as though it were the only natural or fruitful end to her education, these readings also summon from the novel a more absurd suggestion: that “happily ever after” means that the “final” alterations to a lady will coincide with those to her wedding clothes. I would postulate instead that, as little as the social classes in Ducksorth’s model undergo any lasting change, no more do the corresponding lovers who mirror them.

The narrative of Pride and Prejudice may contain a few lessons for Lizzy, but my focus here will be on the different ways in which she and her sisters absolutely are not educated or changed, and it’s a very simple step toward articulating what I know to be true of real women and men: that despite our tendency to make heroes and heroines of ourselves, we are what is sustained in us throughout our plots. Authorial intention aside, the character traits that make it from the beginning of a book to the end must define character as much as those that wax or wane, that are quelled or engendered. These kinds of traits form a base for characterization that is often simply overlooked, but looking for, finding, and concentrating on that base can yield many valuable observations for feminist struggles toward understanding representation of character, and has illustrated new consequences of narrative conventions as well. I hope my
argument will show how the machinations of plot on what will not change in a character can have much to say about the culture which defines both the way characters are and the way they act.

Although I would never suggest that the effect is deliberate or created consciously on Austen’s part, my theory is that characterization in regard to an ideal woman functions as light in a prism. As the prism ‘refracts’ invisible white light into ‘fractions’ of the spectrum, I believe that characterization creates essential fractions of an illusory ideal. The beam of light shines from the prism onto the lit surface in bands of color just as the united qualities of the ideal appear to be forever divided into characters who embody the fractions. I believe this is the case for the simple reason that logically it would be as impossible to create a character who had no valuable qualities as it would be to create one who had all. As Elizabeth Bennet says to her sister Jane of the suitors Darcy and Wickham, “You will never be able to make both of them good for anything. Take your choice, but you must be satisfied with only one. There is but such a quantity of merit between them; just enough to make one good sort of man” (145). I would argue that in creating her characters, Austen ends up parceling out just “such a quantity of merit” as would make one good sort of woman, more specifically the composite ideal woman. Each of the Bennet women must have some good qualities, and these qualities must be components--fractions--of Austen’s concept of ideal womanhood. These fractions are as much a part of the plot as the character herself is, but they function as the bases of characterization that will not change.

In comparing the qualities evident in the Bennet women to those which would be
consecrated by conduct books and other contemporary sources, I find that Austen’s treatment of each Bennet’s assigned fraction of the ideal becomes a basis for a new discussion. In that discussion, the fictional journey of *Pride and Prejudice* ceases to be any kind of gradual education of its heroines, and turns into a critique of a situation in which the qualities of the ideal woman are inflected--modulated--by social class rank.

The clearest example of this class-based inflection will be the simplest to explain: Mrs. Bennet and her favorite daughter Lydia, though appearing to lack good qualities of any kind, actually do possess one that becomes obvious in the context of bourgeois culture. Because middle-class household expenditures were such a crucial part of the economy in the early nineteenth-century, shopping was a highly prized skill, and one that young women thought to cultivate, primarily for displaying the actual goods purchased, but also the state of leisure their purchase implied (Copeland 77; see also Beetham 8-10). Clearly here the situation of a woman in one social rank is going to be vastly different from one in another rank, with either more or less money to spend. Because the rank-inspired difference is so obvious for that one example, and because Mrs. Bennet and Lydia are such ridiculous caricatures without any more substantial gifts, shopping must appear to us a questionable virtue. So having begun with the bourgeois ‘valuable’ of female spending, and the clear relationship between that virtue and the rank of the women who would be judged, I will then proceed to explain Austen’s treatment of what seems a more sensible cause for praise: the quality of a woman’s mind and body, as shown through the characters of Mary and Kitty Bennet respectively. Again in this section, though, calling the fraction a “quality” will be hard to reconcile in our own time and culture. Mary’s studiousness
reveals the laughable paradox of the ideally cultivated female mind becoming so through the reading of the very conduct books that define that ideal; similarly, an appreciation for Kitty’s physical delicacy illustrates how real, live women might flaunt their nearness to death.

I’ll save for last my discussions of Jane and Elizabeth, the two Bennets who’ve seemed more complete in modern times. Austen’s treatment of their most favored fractions launches a class-sensitive critique into more dangerous and advantageous fields. Jane’s combination of beauty and sweet-temperedness makes her into the poster-child of companionate marriages, but that her upwardly mobile marriage is enacted through no effort on her part flaunts the fact that her beauty and temper have in the end actually overcome the class system. In Elizabeth’s case, as the wealth and power she gains in the ranks of Pemberley blatantly license her famously frank speech, Austen actually creates a fraction of the ideal out of character material that was far from acceptable up to that point.

Consumers of Men: Mrs. Bennet and Lydia

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (3)
The famous “truth universally acknowledged” of *Pride and Prejudice’s* opening sentence is often ascribed to Mrs. Bennet and understandably, because the narrator explains in the same first chapter that “the business of her life was to get her daughters married” (3,5). Of the characters we have the pleasure of meeting in Mr. Bingley’s neighborhood, only one wholly consumed by the potential marriage of daughters could so strip the narrator’s phrase of its irony and say it out loud. One of the gracious charms of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it does make fun of itself, that this first line is ultimately an astute observation encased in gross generality, that Austen’s mocking of this inane prophecy is countered by the fact that her story fulfills it. These single men do turn out to have been in dreadful want of wives. Mrs. Bennet’s role as the one character with a head empty enough to be the prophet is treated in a spirit not unlike that of the sentiment itself, and she has only to wait patiently until the end of the book to have her “business” settled. Despite the annoyance Mrs. Bennet conjures, and despite how Austen’s more sensible characters and readers alike cringe to see the results of her influence in her favorite daughter, Lydia, Austen uses the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* not to conceal the offending influence, nor to disarm it, and ‘teach them both a lesson.’ Instead, she leaves them untaught deliberately and so manages to call attention to the cultural and social context in which they annoy and offend.

If we ask *Pride and Prejudice* to provide raw materials for the piecing together of an ideal, few characters seem as pathetic a scrap as Mrs. Bennet. The narrator describes her in the beginning as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper,” and says additionally that “when she was discontented she fancied herself nervous” (4). As if these
faults didn’t hinder her enough, her preoccupation with getting her daughters married wildly colors her ability to judge other characters and situations. Few other explanations are possible for the lunatic swings of feeling she exhibits toward the gentlemen of the neighborhood. First she is “quite delighted” (10) with Mr. Bingley, but as his interest appears to wane, he becomes “nothing to us” (222). Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, is “a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing” (10) until he proposes to Lizzy, at which time he becomes “such a charming man, so handsome, so tall” (255).

Mrs. Bennet’s choice of “not at all worth pleasing” as a descriptor for Mr. Darcy is revealing, because in fact, if it weren’t for his apparent unwillingness, he would be very well worth pleasing merely for his wealth. She says in that same speech that Lizzy “does not lose much” by not suiting the fancy of this suitor, but in fact, Lizzy does lose exactly whatever it is that she later gains by attracting him, the very things that make him “charming,” “handsome” and “tall” enough to look up to: money, rank and consequence.

What Mrs. Bennet reveals by her assessment of Darcy’s “worth” then, is that even when she gets to thinking about husbands for her daughters, Mrs. Bennet is still remarkably stupid. Mr. Bennet’s fortune and property are entailed on his cousin Mr. Collins, and should Mr. Bennet die, Mrs. Bennet would herself lose home, money, and society. Even given this dire need that she and her daughters have for husbands whose fortunes can support the entire family once Mr. Bennet is dead, she fails to take a truly mercenary attitude toward the whole business. Mrs. Bennet can only value Mr. Darcy as a potential match for one of the girls, and once he foils that plan by his uninterestedness, he has no value. She longs for a marriage, any marriage, so even
given the tremendous cost that Lydia’s incurs—not to mention the close call that it represents for her future—Austen shows that Mrs. Bennet is supremely happy:

The marriage of a daughter, which had been the first object of her wishes since Jane was sixteen, was now on the point of accomplishment, and her thoughts and her words ran wholly on those attendants of elegant nuptials, fine muslins, new carriages and servants. She was busily searching through the neighborhood for a proper situation for her daughter, and, without knowing or considering what their income might be, rejected many as deficient in size and importance. (197-198)

It’s highly understandable that Mrs. Bennet does not consider what “their” income will be; she does not even think of the fact that her daughter will now have a husband when she ponders the impending event. Her thoughts are indeed “wholly on those attendants of elegant nuptials” that can be purchased or hired, with characteristically little thought for even a concern as practical and graspable (literally) as money. Similarly, in “Jane Austen and the Consumer Revolution,” Edward Copeland calls Mrs. Bennet one of the “economic fools” for whom “display is all that counts” (85), and he points toward her ecstatic reaction to the announcement of Lizzy’s engagement to Mr. Darcy: “What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages [Lizzy] will have! Jane’s is nothing to it—nothing at all” (243). It is a fairly apt description of Mrs. Bennet’s abilities—one has only to think of the way she refers to the entail of the Bennet estate—“such things I know are all chance in this world”—to agree with him that she is foolish (44).

But it must be with uneasiness that Copeland grants her that epithet; at the beginning of the article he points out the importance of the spending of the middle class woman in the
economy during Jane Austen’s lifetime: “For good and for ill, [consumerism] lay within the power of all women, and as contemporary women’s fiction, cookbooks, women’s magazines and tracts on domestic economy insist, responsible consumer spending had suddenly become one of the first female virtues” (77). Although it seems ludicrous by twentieth-century standards to call buying (without consideration of paying) a virtue, if light from the ideal-woman spectrum falls on Mrs. Bennet, it can only be in the guise of shopping. Even if, on the small scale of the household, thoughtless spending like Mrs. Bennet’s seems less-than-virtuous, on a larger scale it was helpful for the economy more generally. Margaret Beetham points out, additionally, that ladies’ magazines were in themselves a commodity for purchase and played a great role in defining “the feminine role of providing for the household . . . as shopping, as well as--or instead of--making” (8). Austen makes it pointedly clear that shopping is a great concern of Mrs. Bennet’s, as seen when, to her horror, she finds that Mr. Bennet will not fund the traditional pre-wedding spree:

That his anger could be carried to such a point of inconceivable resentment, as to refuse his daughter a privilege, without which her marriage would scarcely seem valid, exceeded all that she could believe possible. She was more alive to the disgrace, which the want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter’s nuptials, than to any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham, a fortnight before they took place. (198)

The narration doesn’t include Lydia’s reaction to this decision of her father’s, but she can’t be terribly pleased by it, judging from the way that Austen has her bent for spending echo her mother’s in so many instances, as in this one where she and Kitty have come to meet Elizabeth
and Jane for lunch in London:

"And we mean to treat you all," added Lydia, "but you must lend us the money, for we have just spent ours at the shop out there." Then shewing her purchases: "Look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall put it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I can make it up any better."

And when her sisters abused it as ugly, she added, with perfect unconcern, "Oh, but there were two or three much uglier in the shop . . . ." (141).

In this episode, Lydia can clearly be called as foolish an "economic fool" as her mother, first for having ordered a meal she couldn't pay for, and then for buying a bonnet simply for shopping's sake. Later she not only boasts of having bought lunch for them all, but is pleased with her purchase for the one reason that might be less legitimate than of its being the least ugly: "I am glad I bought my bonnet, if it is only for the fun of having another bandbox!" (142). Lydia's attitude in this matter frighteningly echoes her mother's attitude toward Mr. Collins as a potential suitor for Elizabeth, or for any of the girls--since he will have Mr. Bennet's fortune to pay with at some time in the future, any daughter is as purchasable as any ugly bonnet.

Those critics who relish Austen's subtleties must be disappointed by such obvious connections. Mrs. Bennet's and Lydia's shopping is, as promised, a gross and obvious example of the treatment of these ideal qualities by class rank through the narrative progress of the novel. Lydia's and Mrs. Bennet's attitudes toward marriage and men throughout have been reminders of their attitudes toward shopping and fashion; they display just as little examination of motive or
practical concerns when considering husbands as they do when choosing muslins, carriages, servants, or bonnets. But what seemed at first glance to be a skimpy and pathetic excuse for a fraction of the ideal is turned into a genuine instrument in the climax of the novel when Lydia’s marriage is literally bought.

Even more instrumentally, though, the sum set down for Lydia’s marriage purchases her honor and an almost-adequate amount of virtue as well. Austen is explicit in describing this transaction when she writes how Mr. Bennet sarcastically laments his negligence in saving his income: “Had he done his duty in that respect, Lydia need not have been indebted to her uncle, for whatever of honour or credit could now be purchased for her” (196). The complaint about Lydia’s situation that Mr. Bennet hides in his self-deprecation is the same as my own: the honor and credit that she’s failed to deserve are being purchased for her, and she is the first of the Bennets to acquire the vital and coveted husband.

Some targets of Austen’s criticism become clear in this light. Consumerism was a virtue in the rank in which Mrs. Bennet and Lydia both start out, and in which Mrs. Bennet remains. Since Lydia’s marriage and honor are purchased with Darcy’s money, it would seem that Austen also recognizes the obvious: that practically unlimited wealth will make honor and credit purchasable in a culture where they are available for purchase. And since Lydia actually moves down into her new social rank, it might seem that Austen means to show that consumerism is legitimate even in the lower ranks of middle-class women. After all, Austen’s happy ending includes a prediction that she will not fall any farther from grace: “in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her” (249). But
just before those lines the Wickhams’ marriage is characterized by constant money troubles, and Lydia has to write every so often to either Jane or Elizabeth for money (248-249). Lydia’s need to keep leeching off the wealth that her sisters have gained shows clearly the injustice done to women by extolling a virtue so essentially dependent on wealth. To a twentieth-century reader to whom class is a function purely of wealth and not birth, such a conclusion will seem as obvious as the virtue displayed in buying a bonnet was suspect, but given that such a virtue did exist and that Austen targeted it so ruthlessly, more palatable fractions of the ideal portend to reveal much as well.

It would be presumptuous to proceed so far as to say that Austen created characters precisely for the reasons that I’ll identify hereafter, but in continuing my discussion I can’t help noticing that other critics of *Pride and Prejudice* scarcely address Mary’s and Kitty’s presence in the novel, much less describe their participation in an overall design. This omission is understandable; no matter what lens is used to examine the characters, the narration still centers around Elizabeth’s and Jane’s plots, and heroines’ siblings who remain single in the end will tend not to attract attention in such a case. If, however, I extend my theory of characterization to minor characters as well, Mary and Kitty’s value in the design of the novel becomes clearer, despite their single status at the conclusion. Austen’s creation of these two maidens as bearers of character values less marked or absent in the other women creates a place for them on the cultural fabric alongside their sisters to whom the plot is more generous.

Modesty and Frailty: Mary and Kitty
Clearly and absurdly, Mary is *Pride and Prejudice*’s voice of female education and accomplishments (the result of careful study and cultivation), the important qualities of the female mind. Kitty is likewise shown to have the physical frailty (undeniably useless if not dangerous) that was a woman’s ideal embodiment. Though these two areas of value might seem somewhat more sensible to twentieth-century readers than Mrs. Bennet’s and Lydia’s spending, Mary and Kitty both fall into a marriage market crack, less adequate or desirable than Jane or Elizabeth, and less inclined toward it at any price than Mrs. Bennet and Lydia. Because of their inadequacy and because their appearances make them appear as a divided potential wife, I see a critique of the process of valuing women in Austen’s society. Once again, the critique highlights different ranks of the middle class. This time, though, as no marriage of fortune moves the women themselves from the rank that they inhabit into another, I’ll forge my conclusions through a comparison of different women of different ranks. The fractions represented by Mary and Kitty separately are properly united in what Austen shows of the wealthy heiress, Miss de Bourgh. She, as Mr. Collins so generously explains, “is unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her making that progress in many accomplishments, which she could not otherwise have failed of; as I am informed by the lady who superintended her education” (46). Miss de Bourgh’s pending betrothal to Darcy involves her in the quest for a husband despite the fact that Rosings is not entailed and she hasn’t any material need for a husband’s provision. Comparing

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2This was only true during the time of the action of the plot. Mary and Kitty would both marry eventually, as Austen would insist that the lives of her characters went on after her novels’ conclusions without her writing down the events. Henry Austen writes in his *Memoir* that Mary would get a clerk in Mr. Phillips’ law office, and Kitty would get a respectable clergyman from a parish near Pemberley.
her to the novel’s perennial Miss Bennets isolates their need for economic marriages and highlights the economic bias in the companionate marriage model.

Readers meet the first half of the potential wife when Mr. Bennet, feigning ignorance, calls on his daughter’s learning to settle the dispute over the proper etiquette for making Bingley’s acquaintance, asking: “What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts” (6). Although she apparently spends most of her time voraciously reading ‘great’ conduct books like *Fordsye’s Sermons to Young Ladies*, the one that Mr. Collins chooses for all of them to read as entertainment, the narrator chooses to mock her by her studies even more fiercely than her father does, and so submits her study of great books as completely useless: “Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how” (6). Later she does say some sensible things, but these are not appreciated any more than her silence is, and she is quite often completely ignored by everyone in the room, as seen in this first of her own sermons, where she so helpfully introduces one of Austen’s important concepts:

“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 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 opinions of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.” (14)
However important this speech is for half of the title of the book, Austen’s irony here is that Mary “piqued” herself on the solidity of her reflections, which in this case regard pride and vanity—that Mary was proudest of and a little vain about her many thoughts on pride and vanity. It smacks of authorial abuse of characters, but it serves to emphasize the paradox that when women learned their lessons from conduct books and sermons, the advice prescribed was, as Deborah Kaplan finds Dr. Gregory’s A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters saying, “to avoid revealing ‘good sense’ or ‘any learning’ lest they seem vain” (42 my emphasis). Claudia Johnson similarly criticizes that age’s “modest and feminine ambition precisely to have none, to go unnoticed” (18). When Austen creates Mary as a character who only attracts notice when she pridefully displays her conduct book lessons on pride and vanity that she’s learned so well, the joke is that those books also taught that young ladies like Mary should abhor pride and vanity, especially in their learning.

Because Mary can bore so fluently, Austen can use her to deflate further the sentiments expressed in the sort of books that she disappears from so many scenes to read, just as having Mr. Collins snobbishly prefer one such book over a novel (like the one in which these characters exist) does for the books themselves:

As for Mary, she was mistress enough of herself to whisper to Elizabeth with a countenance of grave reflection, soon after they were seated at table.

“This is a most unfortunate affair, and will probably be much talked of. But we must stem the tide of malice, and pour into the wounded bosoms of each other, the balm of sisterly consolation.”
Then, perceiving in Elizabeth no inclination of replying, she added, “Unhappy as this event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step may involve her in endless ruin—that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior towards the undeserving of the other sex.” (184)

We can have no more inclination for replying to her statement than Elizabeth has. Modern-day audiences relish the fact that by way of revealing the gravity of Lydia’s situation, Austen lightens it; in an absurd recitation, Mary manages to reduce this moment’s most serious subject to an absurdity. Unfortunately, readers and fellow characters alike fail to notice her in a scene unless she happens to spout a sermon like the one above, one that no one appreciates for the reasons she would intend. She’s only observable when she speaks, and everyone then wishes that she hadn’t.

As a result of these sermons, by the end of the book, it becomes quite a task to remember a time when Mary seemed less like a caricature of the informed female mind, and more like a mere eligible young lady. But there was such a moment: this passage nominates her as a third possible Miss Bennet for Mr. Collins to marry:

With proper civilities the ladies then withdrew; all of them equally surprised to find that [Mr. Collins] meditated a quick return. Mrs. Bennet wished to believe by it that he thought of paying his addresses to one of her younger girls, and Mary might have been prevailed on to accept him. She rated his abilities much higher than any of the others; there was a solidity in his reflections which often struck her, and though 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. (86)

Again, her pride and vanity are evident; indeed this passage heightens the suggestion. On account of her maintainance of a still-superior self image, she can imagine an acceptably companionate marriage to Mr. Collins. It isn’t surprising that Austen would assign to Mary an understanding of marriage where her pride allows emulation to equal affection when considering how she describes Mary’s actual abilities: “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” (17). Dr. Gregory might argue that a conceited manner would injure any degree of excellence simply by displaying it; Mary’s conceit here takes the place of excellence in the same way that she expects it to take the place of affection for Mr. Collins.

Kitty’s introduction to the novel is very much like Mary’s in that it puts her at the mercy of her father’s wit (and of all the Bennet women, poor Kitty is the only one who seems to be gullible enough ever to heed or ever to be offended by his sarcasm). More dangerously than Mary’s introduction, though, Kitty’s puts her at the mercy of her culture by way of that fraction of the ideal that Austen posits immediately in the “Hello Kitty” family exchange:

Mrs. Bennet deigned not to make any reply [to Mr. Bennet]; but unable to contain herself, began scolding one of her daughters.

“Don’t keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven’s sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces.”
“Kitty has no discretion in her coughs,” said her father; “she times them ill.’

“I do not cough for my own amusement,’ replied Kitty fretfully. (5)

On one level her appearance here serves to “name” her as the fourth of the promised “five grown up daughters” that Mrs. Bennet so wants to marry off, just as Mr. Bennet’s calling attention to Mary’s studiousness does for her as the fifth. Moreover, Mrs. Bennet “fancies herself nervous” (4). Mr. Bennet’s ironic statement that “Kitty has no discretion in her coughs” is not so much an attack on Kitty as it is an attack on Mrs. Bennet’s “nerves” which conveniently begin to irritate her at times when it suits her to be irritated or nervous. However noisy Kitty’s coughing could be, it is clearly more discreet than Mrs. Bennet’s complaints.

A deeper level of meaning than mere contrast of characters is evident, however. By showing how Mrs. Bennet makes this inane claim for a delicate constitution, readers can appreciate by comparison the delicacy that Kitty displays without her mother’s pretense. She stands quietly and genuinely for the kind of delicate and danger-ridden physicality that any woman not actually plagued by such health might have “fancied” herself to have, were she concerned with her society’s opinions and ideals in Mrs. Bennet’s foolish way. In the nineteenth century, health was considered a matter of character for women in a way that is nearly incomprehensible now. Lorna Duffin relates that “the image of the perfect lady, in time, became the image of the disabled lady, the female invalid” (26). Although Kitty is far from an invalid, a less-than-robust physicality was crucial to an image of the ideal; Mary Poovey writes that when Lionel Trilling discusses Fanny Price in Mansfield Park, and he:

... recurs to T.E. Hulme’s thoughts on the relationship of the “divine” to the “anti-vital”
in order to account for Fanny’s virtuous debility--she “cannot cut a basket of roses without fatigue and headache”--he universalizes, that is degenders, Austen’s analysis of manners, and consequently misses an entree to her social criticism. Turn-of-the-century female conduct books copiously demonstrate that the extreme physical delicacy which Trilling considers so distressing and so striking in Fanny is the most conventionally feminine thing about her. (95)

I noted above that the only kind of woman who could actually fancy such a virtue would be one who was not actually plagued by it, and a stupid woman besides, for she would value it despite the fact that common ailments could often be life-threatening in those days, as the discussion of Jane’s ailment which keeps her at Netherfield reminded me: Mr. Bennet’s calm, “if [Jane] should die” is of course more sensible than Mrs. Bennet’s “people do not die of little trifling colds” (22). Apparently they do die of big serious colds. In this sense Kitty’s frailty is the twin paradox to the modesty that Mary constantly studies. It would be as impossible for a woman of genuine poor health to see such a state as anything but the absence of good health as it would be for the really modest woman to experience any pride for that achievement. In both cases the ideal woman makes an absence into a positive virtue.

In contrast to Mary and Kitty’s unfortunate division of the ideal woman’s mind and body, Austen reaches for a still-higher plane of parody by their union in Miss de Bourgh. Even as she sits silently displaying no learning whatsoever, her mother expounds on the value of female education, and I wonder whether Miss de Bourgh really “could not have failed of” the accomplishments, or in fact has. By her silent, unassuming behavior, however, she paradoxically
displays that she’s learned Mary’s lessons better than Mary, who displays pride even as she
discusses pride. In addition, Mr. Collins’ description of Miss de Bourgh quite literally praises
nothing if not her extremely delicate constitution, of which even little Kitty could be most
envious. Austen wouldn’t need to be a genius thus to combine debility and ability in a character
who never speaks and whom Claudia Johnson calls “[Pride and Prejudice’s] reigning nonentity
who never utters a single word on her own behalf” (77).³

When we finally have the pleasure of meeting Miss de Bourgh, Elizabeth considers her
only as a potential wife for Mr. Darcy (who is, one might note, already on her mind far more than
he ought to be). She decides that: “She looks sickly and cross.—Yes, she will do for him very
well. She will make him a very proper wife” (104). Elizabeth is sentencing Mr. Darcy to
marriage to Miss de Bourgh precisely because she would make such a lousy companion. This
reminder that Miss de Bourgh is his betrothed-to-be is important; because she is essentially trying
to get him to propose, she’s similar to the other eligible ladies, and this similarity of status allows
the contrast between her representation and that of the other eligible ladies to be revealed. In this
contrast I locate Austen’s critique. It is exactly by positing Miss de Bourgh in the novel in a way
that so little recommends her to us (as “sickly and cross” in the words of our heroine) that Austen
makes it pointedly clear that only the recommendation of wealth can makes her a desirable wife
for anybody.

³Here Johnson echoes her own words about a really ideal woman from an earlier novel:
the sought-after Lucilla Stanley from Hannah More’s Coelebs in Search of a Wife, who cannot be
“otherwise differentiated from a nonentity” (18).
Moreover, the reason that we are not happy to have made her acquaintance is wholly linked to the fact that she’s sickly and will never speak or display any learning whatsoever—that is—since she represents to readers the successful combination of the ideal woman’s body and mind. Since women without a dowry her size so badly needed husbands to support them, and since, without a large dowry, a woman could only attempt to attract a man through the promise of being his lifetime companion, the suggestion that an absence of strength and a kind of learning that would silence them would provide the ideal body and mind reveals the bias of class in this image of the ideal. Since we can’t like Miss de Bourgh and she’s supposed to be getting the richest man anyway just to keep the money in the family, I see an obvious class-conscious critique of a system which champions marriages where women can serve as able companions for their husbands even as it praises them for weakness and silence. And with as cloudy an economic forecast as Mary and Kitty have in comparison to Miss de Bourgh, the consequences of that system fall heavily indeed.

Austen provides a slight remedy for the paradoxical situations she’s imprisoned Mary and Kitty Bennet in by her impressively balanced version of “happily ever after” that comprises the last few pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. Unlike the continued spendthrift leeching that Lydia will engage in, preserving her need for a higher rank’s wealth to legitimize her virtue’s continued reliance on shopping, the two unmarried Bennets are generously released into more promising futures. “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”; likewise, Kitty becomes “less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid,” by simply being “removed from the influence of Lydia’s example” (248). The characters of Kitty and Mary haven’t been in the line of the novel’s narrative progress in the way that Lydia, Jane and Elizabeth have, and so one effect that Austen’s marking of these small personality changes has in the last two pages of the story resembles the tender touch of a fairy godmother’s magic wand. Their character-basing fractions of the ideal remain, as do their faults; Mary will still moralize (after the morning’s guests have gone home, presumably), and Kitty is only “less” like Lydia, but Austen’s gesture to correct what seems inadequate in each, though small, marks an important contrast between them and their other sisters. It is, after all, a transformation for which Lydia and her mother haven’t a use, and for which, as we’ll see in the next sections, Jane and Elizabeth, in their new ranks, haven’t a need.

Sweet, Sweet Jane

In speaking with Jane about their new acquaintance, Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth provides her sister with an opening to remark on the last but not least of his many now-evident gifts: “He is also handsome... which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete” (10). For Austen, these words direct our attention toward his handsomeness and confirm it, since Elizabeth is certainly a more reliable judge than the Meryton assembly. Here also, though, the secondhand effect of Elizabeth’s clever witticisms tells readers much more
than what the other characters get; an equally clever person ‘gets’ the joke and would never believe the things that she suggests. In this particular instance Austen is refusing to allow us to think either that a young man could possibly be handsome or not handsome on purpose or that this handsomeness, if achieved, could possibly complete his character.

I wouldn’t call attention to Elizabeth’s teasing comment or explain its workings so laboriously without reason, and my reason is that in a discussion of Jane I find myself abandoning my own strategy to articulate the ways in which each separate fraction of the ideal woman can be inflected by wealth and rank. Having Elizabeth joke about how stupid it is to think of beauty completing any character anywhere near someone as beautiful as Jane is of magnificent importance in terms of the novel’s illustration of the qualities of the ideal. By it, Austen refuses to locate whatever it is that she finds ideal about Jane merely in her beauty. I would hope that contemporary culture would agree with her decision to have a character suggest such a thing as a joke, recognizing the separation between a handsome man and a man of good character. It follows, though reluctantly, that she might have suggested the same for women, that some were fortunate enough to be pretty, and others less fortunate and plain, but that the possession and cultivation of the various female virtues espoused in conduct books would also be known to be separate from considerations of mere physical beauty by all but the very shallow. For the concept of the ideal to be culturally appealing, for its fractions to be ostensibly attainable, it becomes the job of the many beautiful characters in fiction like Jane to connect female beauty to some more widely and reputable endorsed virtue.

Mrs. Bennet is the first to allude to Jane’s beauty when she says it is twice Lizzy’s, an
opinion which occurs to her precisely as she's busily persuading her husband that Mr. Bingley will be marrying one of their daughters, a circumstance which will become important later in my discussion (4). At the first ball where the ladies meet Mr. Bingley, Jane’s beauty does prove to be perfectly suited to his taste, but it is her manners which impress his sisters. In a passage of ironic comment that I can imagine Elizabeth gleefully mouthing in response to her mother’s abuse, the narrator leaves no question about the power that the interaction of these two poles of her excellence wields:

Miss Bennet [Mr. Darcy] acknowledged to be pretty, but she smiled too much.

Mrs. Hurst and her sister allowed it to be so--but still they admired her and liked her and pronounced her to be a sweet girl, and one whom they should not object to know more of. Miss Bennet was therefore established as a sweet girl, and their brother felt authorized by such commendation to think of her as he chose. (12)

Jane is less a caricature like her mother and youngest sisters precisely because she is allowed to have both beauty and character, and Jane’s character is most notable for her temper. The very term “conduct” is testimony to these books’ glut of advice on manners and behavior, and Austen’s deliberate positing of the most beautiful behavior and most genuine feelings of any Bennet in the most beautiful looking Bennet thus leaves little room for speculation. Clearly Austen means to connect beauty of appearance with a more palatable beauty in Jane’s character, the beauty of her gentle temperament as evidenced by her equally gentle and compliant manners
(the one outlandish anomaly of the Bennet child rearing system).

Later, in musing on the growing attraction between Bingley and Jane, Elizabeth is pleased to note that Jane unites "with great strength of feeling a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner" for the sole purpose of answering the "suspicions of the impertinent" (15). *They* are probably looking at the future Mrs. Bingley with as many hopes of her falling in love with Mr. Bingley as she could ever wish the gentleman himself to have (15). If she had the entirety of their courtship to reflect on, though, Elizabeth might not be quite so pleased to note that unity. The irony of Jane's situation is revealed here; it is that Jane's strength of feeling is in fact concealed too well by her "composure" and "uniform cheerfulness." This unity does prove to be a difficulty as Jane's plot threatens to leave her unmarried at the novel's conclusion. Charlotte Lucas famously argues with Elizabeth about the danger of Jane's placidity and in so doing, predicts accurately that this particular form of "beauty" of Jane's will have very different consequences:

...but it is sometimes a disadvantage to be so very guarded. If a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him; and it will then be but poor consolation to believe the world equally in the dark.

There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself. We can all begin freely--a slight preference is natural enough; but there

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4The three younger girls' very different kinds of foolishness are all attributable to Mrs. Bennet's unthinking example, and Lizzy's wit seems like a less-bitter version of her Father's thoughtful cynicism, but Jane is miraculously lacking either his or her mother's behavioral influence. I do sometimes wonder if perhaps this miracle, together with the miracle of her plot's resolution more generally, have any connection to her first name.
are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In
nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew more affection than she feels. Bingley
likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help
him on. (15)

Elizabeth’s response is the famous, “If a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavor to
conceal it, he must find it out,” which, in the context of the rest of the book, turns out to be just
plain wrong, or at least not specific enough for men with sneaky friends. Darcy and the Miss
Bingleys take full advantage of the fact that Jane’s heart is not visibly touched, and only the
success of Darcy and Elizabeth’s romance allows the milder couple to marry. Charlotte is here
articulating the whole difficulty that drives the novel: that sometimes a person doesn’t know that
a person is in love with a person. Elizabeth’s point, however, is better taken; Jane is not
endeavoring anything at all, not competing by any rules, not even the rules that Charlotte is
submitting as necessary, fair, and prudent.

Austen’s articulation of the conflict of strategies between Charlotte and Jane (as voiced by
Elizabeth) is admirably delicate, but staging it as nothing more than a mild disagreement between
two friends un-helpfully conceals the situation that all young women like them were in. Making
Jane and Elizabeth into the voice of faith in romance screens the ultimate practicality of
Charlotte’s plan, and I find it easy to miss the poignancy of Charlotte’s warning about what is not
“safe” about Jane’s behavior. Similarly, the penalty Charlotte pays by having Mr. Collins for a
husband disguises the ultimate reward she is given in the form of all Mr. Bennet’s property.
Mary Poovey addresses the very real material concerns of the Bennet women’s futures should
any one of them fail to find a supporter, as well as Charlotte’s answer to those concerns:

For the inevitable result of an entail in a household more blessed with daughters than frugality is, at best, a limited choice of suitors; at worst, the Bennet’s shortage of money for dowries and their equivocal social position foretell spinsterhood, dependence on a generous relative, or, most ominous of all, work as a governess or lady’s companion. . . . when Charlotte Lucas rejects romance, she does so for its opposite, the matter-of-fact assessment that a “comfortable home” is more substantial than romantic fantasies. (197) Granted, these concerns would weigh more heavily on Charlotte at age twenty-seven than they ever could on Lizzy and Jane at twenty and twenty-three, but all three women are wise enough to comprehend the chasm of need on whose edge they all stand.

With the Bennets’ dire situation thus in mind, it seems to me an important point that Austen would include a daughter for the Bennets on whom all hopes of the future could rest. Mrs. Bennet’s all-too-quick insistence that Jane is more beautiful than Lizzy (4) and Bingley’s comparison of Jane to an angel both make sense in this light (12). Elizabeth’s hint about the “suspicions of the impertinent” indicates nothing so much as that everyone in town is expecting Bingley to fall for Jane. Not knowing his personality from Adam’s, their only reason can be that she is so beautiful and sweet and he so rich. It’s as if she’s started out so far ahead of the plainer girls like Charlotte that even though Bingley dances with Charlotte first, there’s little suggestion that anyone but Jane is expected to “fix” him, and according to Lizzy, she’s not even expected to participate indecorously in the process. My critique of Jane’s character stems precisely from the fact that Jane’s marriage plot has very little to do with her behavior, and that her beauty is
“banked” on to pick up the slack. Austen employs the words of the obnoxious Mrs. Bennet to communicate the obnoxious reality of Jane’s position in the scene at Netherfield after Jane has taken ill there:

“I am sure,” she added, “if it was not for such good friends I do not know what would become of [Jane], for she is very ill indeed, and suffers a vast deal, though with the greatest patience in the world, which is always the way with her, for she has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with. I often tell my other girls they are nothing to her. You have a sweet room here, and a charming prospect over that gravel walk. (29 my emphasis)

Of course Mrs. Bennet doesn’t realize what she’s doing when she uses the same word two sentences apart to describe first her daughter and then a room⁵, but for her to compare Jane to real estate so directly is telling. It’s as if Jane stands as the Bennet commodity on the marriage ‘market.’ With sweetness and beauty in abundance, no Miss Bennet but Jane seems as worthy of purchase, and with sweetness and passivity, none could be as content with that status. And in the end, she does indeed get sold. When the marriage does eventually come off, Mrs. Bennet

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⁵I began reading PP with the intent to study Austen’s language using Bakhtin’s theories of novelistic discourse, and this connection is one of the only remnants of that study. Mrs. Bennet echoes herself here. The echo is, in terms of novelistic discourse, Austen’s redeployment of “sweet,” and it functions in the way that Bakhtin suggests that one speaker’s echo of another’s may when he writes that: “In the ordinary speech of our everyday life such a [repeated] use of another’s words is extremely widespread, especially in dialogue, where one speaker very often literally repeats the statement of the other speaker, investing it with new value and accenting it in his own way—with expressions of doubt, indignation, irony, mockery, ridicule, and the like” (Problems 194). Austen is utilizing Mrs. Bennet’s limits of vocabulary to “invest” the second “sweet” with an additional, ‘commodifying’ meaning.
boldly voices the sentiments we've been recoiling from in our minds the whole time: "I knew how it would be. I always said it must be so, at last. I was sure you could not be so beautiful for nothing!" (223). Readers ignoring (as I prefer to) the economic interests involved in social classes that create marriages of interest do so for the sake of the more appealing alternative, companionate marriages, whose appeal is reinforced by bourgeois fiction! (Perkin ?? passim). We know the "how it would be," (or rather, how it has been) of Jane and Bingley's engagement far better than Mrs. Bennet does, and better in fact than Jane does. Jane's beauty, which we freely equate with her goodness, her passivity, and as many other delicious character treats as we (living in representational Always Always Land) can name--this beauty has clearly placed her so far ahead of Charlotte in the race for husbands that she scarcely even has to compete. As a result, Charlotte, beginning with less beauty to be paired with the same kind of charm, behaves very differently from Jane, and seems to have to, despite the fact that both women are equally disadvantaged. Under the guise of distracting Mr. Collins from those who cannot abide him, Charlotte is performing a task of "kindness," but the narrator relates that the object "was nothing less, than to secure [Elizabeth] from any return of Mr. Collins's addresses, by engaging them toward herself" (81).

Jane is as sweet as a breakfast room, and just as passive, and does not change her ways at the end. Jane does not even seem to repent her failure to see the Bingley sisters for what they are in the letter that she sends Elizabeth reporting their apparent change of heart:

... I confess myself to have been entirely deceived in Miss Bingley's regard for me. But, my dear sister, though the event has proved you right, do not think me obstinate if I still
assert, that, considering what her behavior was, my confidence was as natural as your suspicion. I do not at all comprehend her reason for wishing to be intimate with me, but if the same circumstances were to happen again, I am sure I should be deceived again. (97-98).

In the same way that Jane’s unquestioning generous spirit affirms what seems like a kind of mistaken-ness even in hindsight, Austen’s otherwise self-conscious plot seems to me, in the end, to silently champion its own blind faith in face of the worthiness of the poor, lovely, kind girl getting Prince Charmingest while taking the least trouble to do so. It is in the wish-fulfilling end of the novel that I locate a critique of the culture. With enough beauty and enough charm, Jane is able to not only leave the material considerations of life in a rigid class system unacknowledged and unprovided for, but to transcend the rigidity. Austen’s plot clearly makes good use of Jane and Bingley’s relationship as a kind of springboard for the falling and rising action of Elizabeth and Darcy’s. Darcy’s pride masquerading as concern for his friend creates Elizabeth’s prejudice against him which is only to be relieved by his earnest persuasion that “the serenity of your sister’s countenance and air was such, as might have given the most acute observer, a conviction that, however amiable her temper, her heart was not likely to be easily touched” (128, my emphasis). Without this more material rationale for Austen’s telling of Jane’s story, however, there is little to call it but wish-fulfillment.

I quoted lines in the beginning of this section to define the inseparability of Jane’s beauty and temper by the facetious suggestion that Bingley’s character was completed by his being handsome. But I deliberately overlooked a third effect of Elizabeth’s comment, which is now of
importance. It is simply that Elizabeth and not Jane must call attention to this ‘fraction’ of Bingley’s charms, that Jane’s delicacy might be compelling her to forever keep her judgement of Bingley’s appearance to herself. Both Elizabeth’s frankness of speech and her fluency with irony are clearly required to introduce such a subject to the arena of Jane’s fine and tender affections. The manner in which Austen counters Jane’s passive delicacy with Elizabeth’s frankness is not to be ignored; as much as Lizzy avoids passivity, she sacrifices delicacy.

The Stitchery Speaks

I think it’s safe to say that, as difficult as it is to imagine Mrs. Bennet measuring up against Miss Conduct-Book Ideal 1812, it would be no easier for us to say with conviction that she in turn measures up to Elizabeth Bennet. Near Lizzy, the twentieth century value for unconventionality entrenches us in its own mighty domain; as Mary Poovey puts it, Elizabeth’s behaviors have “seemed admirable and necessary correctives” to the absurdities of other characters (195). However, the “lively, playful disposition” for which she is so famous, in Claudia Johnson’s words, “constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety” (PP 9, Johnson 75). The same kind of social forces that eclipsed Jane’s sweetness in passivity here necessitate that every example of Elizabeth’s frank speech runs the risk of breaching decorum. Compared to other Bennets, notably her mother and Lydia, Elizabeth hardly seems ill-mannered. However, a more careful comparison between her family’s embarrassing acts and her own behavior reveals that, in many instances, Elizabeth’s behavior hardly differs from the feats
of mortification they perform.

During the ball at Netherfield, when “to Elizabeth it appeared that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they possibly could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success,” she at one point begs her mother: “For heaven’s sake, madam, speak lower” and feels “sorry for her father’s speech” and regrets that Mr. Collins’ “had been spoken so loud as to be heard by half the room” (67-69). Mr. Bennet isn’t stupid, and Mr. Collins has virtue to spare, but still she wishes that they would all shut up. Her own disapproval of her parents and Mr. Collins unfortunately exposes her to a similar critique. A specific scolding for Elizabeth wouldn’t focus on her actual speech, where her intelligence and manners must suffice, but, like in the case of Mary’s well informed preaching, on her tendency to speak. As Dr. Gregory wrote in his A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters in 1774, “Modesty will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company” (quoted in Poovey 24). This advice lends support to Mr. Collins’ fatuous predictions of Lady Catherine’s conditional approval of Elizabeth as his own choice of lady: “your wit and vivacity I think must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite” (72). No matter how offensive, wit tempered with silence must be acceptable indeed.

The joke is that Lady Catherine’s rank does not excite anything of the kind. With Dr. Gregory’s injunction in mind, then, I doubt that Austen could have created a less modest character, or one whose wit and vivacity were less generally acceptable. Elizabeth herself admits this several times, most avidly after her playful suggestion to Mr. Collins that he might dance at
the Netherfield ball, since his response includes a request for her hand in the first two dances:

“Elizabeth felt herself completely taken in. She had fully proposed being engaged by Wickham for those very dances: --and to have Mr. Collins instead? her liveliness had been never worse timed. There was no help for it however” (59). Even she mistrusts her ability to hold her tongue; in the scene when Lydia spills the beans that Mr. Darcy was at hers and Wickham’s wedding, Elizabeth is forced to “put it out of her power” to ask questions “by running away” (204). In contrast, “Jane’s delicate sense of honour would not allow her to speak to Elizabeth privately of what Lydia had let fall” (205).

Elizabeth will seem as remorseful as she ever is in the novel over her inability have kept herself from speaking up to thank Darcy for paying for Lydia’s marriage:

But I wonder how long you would have gone on if you had been left to yourself. I wonder when you would have spoken, if I had not asked you! My resolution of thanking you for your kindness to Lydia had certainly great effect. Too much, I am afraid; for what becomes of the moral, if our comfort springs from a breach of promise, for I ought not to have mentioned the subject? This will never do. (245)

Having recognized this same flaw of frank speech in the virtues of an otherwise delightful character, Johnson recognizes that “Austen’s manifestly self-conscious achievement in Elizabeth Bennet thus consists precisely in having made her ‘creature’ so ‘delightful’ despite her continual infractions of the rules of propriety” (76). However, the above example is telling in another way as well. Whatever remorse Elizabeth shows lasts no longer than her comment and Darcy’s reply. She no sooner announces that “. . .this will never do,” and Darcy says “. . . you need not distress
yourself..." but she goes back to her lively ways with, "Lady Catherine has been of infinite use, which ought to make her happy for she loves to be of use" (257). Elizabeth’s “infractions” continually take the form of speech, but even in discussing her professed regrets, she immediately forgets and commits another.

Though her perspective toward Darcy has changed, on a grander scale it is still impossible to conclude that Elizabeth has somehow learned a lesson or been educated in any way. Georgiana’s dominant impression of her new sister-in-law shows Austen maintaining that frankness of speech: “at first [Georgiana] often listened [to Elizabeth] with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry”(249). This passage (in the third-from-last paragraph of the book) does nothing if it does not condone Elizabeth’s former failing. Austen’s bold evidence that Elizabeth hasn’t changed her “impertinent” ways suggests that, in the same way that the position of a wife allows for more free speech than Georgiana’s position as a much younger sister can, Elizabeth’s new wealth and rank will now prevent her from any ill consequences of her manners. Like Mr. Darcy’s “right to be proud” that is based on, among other things, his wealth, Mrs. Darcy now seems to have a “right to be impertinent”!

In the former example of Mr. Darcy’s “right to be proud,” pride that is somehow justified by Darcy’s wealth and noble persona ceases to be pride in the sense that Mrs. Bennet meant it. Just so, Elizabeth’s impertinence is never named impertinence after she says, in answer to Darcy’s assertion that he admired her for the liveliness of her mind, that, “you may as well call it
impertinence at once. It was very little less” (256). Lady Catherine hasn’t any impertinence in her free speech precisely because her “character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness” (227). The most remarkable example of the inflection of the qualities of the ideal is the simplest to explain. Elizabeth’s fraction of the ideal only becomes ideal through the ideal marriage.
A word at last about Jane Austen's humor. Tracing some of the ways in which she technically registered then kicked around her culture's concept of ideal womanhood has naturally forced me all along to be quite technical in my discussion. Austenophiles will probably accuse me of too-smoothly disarming her of her best weapon. I may have indeed done so, and even by means of a model altogether too contrived for goodness' sake and their patience. Knowing of this accusation is doubly nerve-wracking for each disclaimer I've felt compelled to include regarding authorial intention. In working with Austen's characterization as a prism of ideal womanhood, I have essentially caught her doing *boring things on purpose*, and I have had to relate them in boring terms. However, I will stand for my model and I will stand for it in all its tedium. My reason and my ferocity in expressing it, stems from the fact that the accusation is of somehow dishonoring one of my favorite authors, and, more importantly, one most close to my own situation in life. I'm called to point out the ways in which I see myself to have in fact honored her. These reasons may be too contrived once again, but since I argue for contrivedness, so much the better.

Others have done worse. For a hundred years after Austen wrote her novels, criticismlargely took the form of praise, praise for her morality, her clear-sightedness, her delicacy, while her writing overall was dubbed by Margaret Oliphant in 1870 "the natural result of the constant, though probably quite unconscious, observation in which a young woman, with no active pursuit to occupy her, spends, without knowing it, so much of her time and youth" (Norton 286). I find

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6A term I here donate to posterity as a replacement for the less-respectful "Jancites."
it inexplicable that a writer could call writing “no active pursuit” but, there it is. In registering that accusation, I cannot but feel that if I have temporarily denied her gifts (like humor) for the sake of my tidy search for characterization method, I have injured her no more than those who would call her eminently gifted, while picturing her with pen in hand, passively writing, even while the complexities of life slipped all unawares into her mind via the tea scene before her. Gift and method are as much foes of the writer’s craft as they are its champions, as they are foes of each other vying for the lion’s share of the success of the writing.

So I think that to focus temporarily on method for Austen is no great crime, and I think that to focus on what was supposed to seem ideal to her as a woman in relation to what was in the end championed in the women who appear in her all her writings will reveal much. One thinks of “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich” who seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence” and written about after Lizzy Bennet, for whom cleverness paved the way, or of Fanny Price who gets to start her quest pale and drab looking, but end it much improved (Emma 3, my emphasis). If we must picture her life and culture slipping into her mind, and coloring her judgement of her life and herself, at least let us do so in a way that, by recognizing the force of ultimate irony, gives her the benefit of the doubt of happiness and laughter nonetheless.
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