



Mrs. Bennet's Least Favorite Daughter

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In her daughter the mother does not hail a member of the superior caste; in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels herself betrayed.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*¹

MOST READERS AND CRITICS, quite rightly, think of *Pride and Prejudice* as a love story, the romance of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Its special quality as a romantic narrative, as Roger Gard puts it, is that the obstacles to the lovers' fulfillment are "psychological and internal, not a matter of external bars" (99). Encountering each other at first with antagonism, the two main figures must pass through this misunderstanding, work through their initial mistakes until they recognize their feelings (and each other) for what they are. As I argued in my paper at the Boston JASNA meeting in 2000, Jane Austen's profound presentation of the relation at the heart of her novel involves the reader in a reappraisal of the meaning of love.² Austen's work is illuminated by Jessica Benjamin's contention that recognition of the other person's uniqueness is a rare potential of the psyche, a release from the otherwise ubiquitous "bonds of love."

Similar reasoning, focused on the central couple, leads the celebrated philosopher Slavoj Žižek to suggest that Austen is a novelist who is comparable in stature to Hegel as a thinker. Imagining as “a comical hypothesis” that “the first encounter of the future lovers was a success—that Elizabeth had accepted Darcy’s proposal,” he asks, “What would happen? Instead of being bound together in true love, they would become a vulgar everyday couple, a liaison of an arrogant, rich man and a pretentious, empty-headed young girl. If we want to spare ourselves the painful round-about route through the misrecognition, we miss the Truth itself: only the ‘working through’ of the misrecognition allows us to accede to the true nature of the other and at the same time to overcome our own deficiency” (Žižek 64). It can certainly be claimed then, that the central relation of the novel is not only an alluring romance, but a profound account—at once epistemological and psychological—of the meaning of love.

But it is not quite true to say that the obstacles to the love of Darcy and Elizabeth are internal rather than external, nor quite just to the novel to treat the ethical and personal drama of their relation as the exclusive focus of the text. The character who illustrates this most clearly is Mrs. Bennet, and in this paper I shall focus on this figure, whose relation to her second daughter has not received extensive critical attention—surprisingly little, considering the dominant position she has in the first chapters of the novel, the important role she plays in her daughter’s fate, and—as I shall suggest—the rather profound and disconcerting kinds of dramatic implication that Austen succeeds in generating around her. Mrs. Bennet, though, is not easy to think about: and to dismiss her is perhaps, after all, only to defend oneself against her.

For one common approach to the character is to consider it as a caricature, of which *Pride and Prejudice* contains several, including Mr. Collins—as a figure somehow beyond the pale, whom we need not take seriously. What might justify this treatment? On the first page of *Pride and Prejudice*, writes Julia Prewitt Brown, “we have only the disembodied voices of wife and husband clashing in an empty space” (Brown 66). D. W. Harding notes too this “stageyness of technique” and suggests that “[t]he influence of the eighteenth-century theatre in some parts of the novel is consistent with the very strongly marked caricature of some figures and a rather sharp transition from them to the seriously portrayed characters” (99). A caricature, roughly speaking, is a figure which does not interact with others and thus does not develop, does not deepen in interest to the reader, but merely

goes on displaying the same traits in different circumstances—the amusement to be gained from such figures being in the nature of the running joke. Mrs. Bennet’s references to her “nerves,” for instance, would certainly put her in this category.

Thus there are aspects of Mrs. Bennet which suggest the influence of that eighteenth-century theatre with which Austen, from her girlhood, was most certainly familiar. The Bennets’ relationship, for example, has its precursors in such couples as the Oaklys in George Colman’s much performed *The Jealous Wife* (1761). When thwarted or baffled, Mrs. Oakly, like Mrs. Bennet, uses her body and illness symptoms in comically unavailing attempts to get her own way. The same play can illustrate that staple of the comic theatre, the self-contradictory speech, as when the heroine Harriot’s father blusters, “But she shall have him: I will make her happy, if I break her heart for it.” The speech of Sir Antony Absolute in Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1775: performed at Steventon in 1784) is full of similar moments: “So you will fly out! can’t you be cool, like me? What the devil good can Passion do!—Passion is of no service, you impudent, insolent, over-bearing Reprobate!—There you sneer again!—don’t provoke me!—but you rely upon the mildness of my temper—you do, you Dog! you play upon the meekness of my disposition!” The absurdly contradictory and self-undermining speech is a comic form adopted wholeheartedly by Austen and examples can be found in all her novels. “[W]hat is your opinion *now* of this sad business of Jane’s?” asks Mrs. Bennet of Elizabeth. “For my part, I am determined never to speak of it again to anybody. I told my sister Philips so the other day” (227). “I told you in the library, you know,” she has earlier harangued Elizabeth,

“that I should never speak to you again, and you will find me as good as your word. I have no pleasure in talking to undutiful children.—Not that I have much pleasure indeed in talking to any body. People who suffer as I do from nervous complaints can have no great inclination for talking. Nobody can tell what I suffer!—But it is always so. Those who do not complain are never pitied” (113).

What distinguishes an effusion like this (and its inevitable follow-up: “all of you, hold your tongues, and let Mr. Collins and me have a little conversation together” [113]) from the comic display of the theatre is the presence of Mrs. Bennet’s daughters and the demands, partly stated, partly implied, such behavior makes on them. It is thus not possible merely to

dismiss Mrs. Bennet as a fool, because the focus of the reader's attention is at least in part on the cost she exacts from those who have to spend their days listening to her. If the reader feels both amusement and contempt at this figure's mindless inanities he or she must also reflect that despising one's mother is a far from comfortable position for a daughter, especially an extremely intelligent daughter, to be in.

"Silences in *Pride and Prejudice*," comments Tara Ghoshal Wallace, "are never neutral" (46). We might well imagine Elizabeth Bennet listening to her mother at such moments, or sitting through such a shameless speech as that in which she attempts to sell Jane to Bingley and thinking, "This woman is a caricature. She's grotesque. *And what's more, she's my mother.*" Mrs. Bennet, then, would no longer belong to a closed sphere of narrative convention when brought into relation with a heroine with whom the reader has already formed a sympathetic bond. But no such thought, of course, appears in the text. "The mother was found to be intolerable," by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst; Darcy, with due regard to the pain he is giving, reminds Elizabeth of the "total want of propriety" of her mother's behavior: but Elizabeth's thoughts about her mother are never presented in the articulate form I have imagined them. "[T]he circumstances to which he particularly alluded, as having passed at the Netherfield ball . . . could not have made a stronger impression on his mind than on hers," the reader is told as Elizabeth reviews Darcy's letter (209). Elizabeth had certainly "blushed and blushed again with shame and vexation" at her mother's domination of the conversation on that occasion. Mortified, embarrassed, though she most definitely is, her responses to her mother never take the articulate and formulated shape that she allows herself in criticism of her father. Never neutral, the silence of Elizabeth about her relation to her mother is charged with potent implications.

Wallace comments too on that memorable moment at Netherfield in which Elizabeth is attempting to keep up a polite conversation about the comparative merits of life in town and country, saying "But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever," and Mrs. Bennet unexpectedly "cries," "Yes, indeed . . . I assure you there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in town" (43). As Wallace notes, the text offers "no explanation as to why this innocuous inanity should give rise to so much surprise, silence and triumph" (45). It is surely not too difficult to interpret. The silence which follows Mrs. Bennet's assertion is an expression of the disarray her intru-

sion causes amid this carefully managed polite argument. Though hardly understanding what is being said, she thrusts herself forward to take over her daughter's role, and thus uncovers to the listening group the force of her egotism, and even of something that might be obscurely felt as her brute desire. But the work of interpreting the silence that follows her remark, or the nature of her "triumph" in causing it, is certainly devolved upon the reader.

Mrs. Bennet has an intrusive, an almost physical presence in these first chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*, and this effect is accomplished without any description of her person. As in this instance, the reader experiences her repeatedly as overriding, or taking possession of, her daughters' lives. On Elizabeth's first appearance in the novel, for example, her speech is usurped by her mother. "Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat," Mr. Bennet suddenly says to her, "I hope Mr. Bingley will like it Lizzy." "We are not in a way to know what Mr. Bingley likes," says her mother resentfully, "since we are not to visit" (6). Taking over Elizabeth's right of reply, she simultaneously displays herself as sulky, rude, and resentful. Yet, of course, if there is an ugly form of symbiosis in Mrs. Bennet's relation to her daughters (exemplified a moment later in a different mode when, "unable to contain herself," she attempts to commandeer Kitty's coughing), the novel offers plenty of extenuating circumstances. It is entirely natural and plausible that a mother in her situation, with a feckless, unprovident husband and five daughters, would develop an overriding anxiety about their future, and fail to honor the distinctiveness of their natures and destinies from her own.

Moreover in this small scene she is the victim of one of her husband's habitual conversational traps. In addressing his daughter in preference to his wife, Mr. Bennet is by implication displacing his wife, and favoring Elizabeth with the attention and information he knows she craves. But though *Pride and Prejudice* clearly (and explicitly) suggests that Mr. Bennet has a lot to answer for, the overriding implication, I think, is not that, having regard to their economic circumstances Mrs. Bennet's psychology is one we can, at a stretch, sympathize with and understand. Instead—and fostered by the narration's close affinity with Elizabeth's point of view—it is to force upon the reader, repeatedly, scenes in which Mrs. Bennet's talk and behavior are felt to be personally offensive, in all nuances of the word. Though the role of mother is certainly the only one her society allows her to claim, she is that worst exemplar of the mother, a woman

who cannot separate herself from her offspring because she is in many respects herself still an envious and fractious child.

Mrs. Bennet, then, to use the phrase Austen repeatedly attaches to her, is “unable to contain herself.” Of demonstrably “uncertain temper,” her fluctuations of mood have no fulcrum, no internal resting place. From “lamentation” to “transport” her emotional oscillations are extreme. Mr. Bennet’s announcement that he has visited Bingley after all is greeted by a “tumult of joy”: he leaves the room, “fatigued by her raptures.” When she is thwarted, she is resentful and childish, declares herself “nervous and poorly,” and is prone to express her disappointments in an array of real or imagined physical symptoms. Her world is black and white: Bingley is excessively handsome and his sisters are charming women; Darcy, on the contrary, is shockingly rude and a most disagreeable, horrid man. She is undoubtedly funny, too: but there is something else about Mrs. Bennet that makes her disturbing. It is that we glimpse, in the violence of her emotions, in the volubility of her discourse, in the unnuanced, coarse vibrations of her presence, a great deal of energy. And it is—we might concede—a sexual energy, too. “I remember the time when I liked a red coat very well—and indeed so I do still at my heart” (29): this confession, early in the novel, already indicates how Mrs. Bennet’s still unappeased sexuality is to play its role in fostering her youngest daughter’s erotic escapade. Thus, in another demonstration of her failure to keep her own life and emotions separate from her daughters’, Mrs. Bennet later champions Lydia’s desire to go to Brighton in terms of her own wishes. “A little sea bathing would set me up for ever” (229), she opines. Her husband, of course, is implicated too: I imagine that Mr. Bennet, so practiced at closing his study door, is practiced too at turning his back in bed.

The sexuality of a mother is not a pretty spectacle to her daughters, even when it is buried, as here, represented only as erratic forays, hypochondria, and hysterics. But the text has another secret to disclose, even more disturbing. Jane receives a note from Netherfield. “Mrs. Bennet’s eyes sparkled with pleasure, and she was eagerly calling out while her daughter read, ‘Well, Jane, who is it from, and what is it about? what does he say? Well, Jane, make haste and tell us; make haste, my love’” (30). It is not just her inquisitiveness, nor the assumption in her questions that the correspondent must be Bingley—both signals of her overbearing possessiveness—that is telling here. Soon, Mr. Bennet, relishing the mystery he is creating, tells his wife and daughters that he is expecting an addition

to the family party. “‘The person of whom I speak, is a gentleman and a stranger.’ Mrs. Bennet’s eyes sparkled.—‘A gentleman and a stranger! It is Mr. Bingley I am sure’” (61). No other indication of Mrs. Bennet as a physical being is given except her “sparkling eyes.” And this notation occurs in the midst of chapters in which her second daughter’s “fine eyes” (27) catch the attention of Darcy, and are repeatedly kept before the reader by the tiresome and unavailing teasing of him by Miss Bingley (36, 46). Can this similarity of notation be an accident? Or is it the signal of a consanguinity that the text elsewhere deploys in a more veiled form? Are Mrs. Bennet’s baffled energies a distorted, bizarre version of her daughter’s transgressive high spirits—this daughter who runs everywhere? Elizabeth’s provocative social manner remains within the wiry bounding line of decorum, but it surely reproduces, in moderated form, her mother’s forwardness. Is Mrs. Bennet’s embodiment then a more or less pathological variation of her daughter’s vitality? One does not press such questions too far. Yet we can begin to see how Austen prompts the reader’s imagination to fill in the spaces, the silences of the relation between Elizabeth and her mother.

Mrs. Bennet’s presence in the novel is amplified and extended through the figure of the youngest daughter, Lydia, her favorite. Neglected, left to her own devices, Lydia replicates the narcissism and thoughtlessness of her mother, for whom she is an alter-ego, the re-enactment of her youth.³ Her unabashed sexuality is a demonstration of everything the novel assumes, but keeps otherwise implicit and under wraps. Like her mother, Lydia, then, is a comedic figure who at the same time relates seriously to the heroine’s romantic life. She shares several characteristics with her most gifted sister, notably her self-confidence, and more disconcertingly, her enjoyment of a laugh. There are moments when, “untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy and fearless” (315), a more glancing connection with Elizabeth is indicated, who, we remember, was thought to look “almost wild” after her walk to Netherfield in the mud. Lydia’s character invites the reader to imagine that the very quality of insouciance, of ineducability, so strongly marked in her mother, might also be a kind of strength. Elizabeth is tart and dry about her, and so is the narrator, but the reader might have other views. Sharing her mother’s shamelessness, she can be granted more comic latitude, more ability to enact herself freely, because, though Elizabeth certainly disassociates from her, she does not feel in the presence of this younger sister nearly as contaminated as she does with her mother.

I have been arguing then, that Mrs. Bennet affects the reader more deeply than a caricature could ever do, that whilst still being grotesque, she is not dismissable as an independent ingredient in a novel concerned mainly with her daughter's romance. Obviously Mrs. Bennet's habitual impropriety is a material impediment to her daughter's chances of making a prosperous marriage. But the novel is portraying something more intimate, more potent in the relation of mother and daughter. When the mother is felt to be uncomfortably close to the self, the dream of escape from her is all the more urgent. Thinking about Mrs. Bennet leads one to conclude that *Pride and Prejudice* retains its hold as a great romantic narrative, not just because it tells the story of Darcy and Elizabeth's quarrel and reconciliation, but because it enacts in the boldest and most persuasive form the young adult's desire for differentiation and separation from the parent of the same sex.

Mrs. Bennet, shameless herself, reduces her witty, outgoing daughter to agonies of shame. She is a monstrous caricatural announcement of that experience almost every young person endures, some time or other, in the presence of their parents. From this psychological fund the novel draws when it invites the reader to understand that Mrs. Bennet, though comical (and perhaps never so comical as when the news of Elizabeth's engagement to Darcy reduces her, for once, to cataleptic silence), is simultaneously, in the volatility of her temperament, in the illiberality of her mind, in the pushy materialism of her ambitions, a persistent shadow over her daughter's destiny. That is why the fact that Pemberley is so far from Longbourn is made much of. It is stressed too that the Gardiners—the surrogate father and mother—come and visit, but it is Elizabeth's triumph that in loving and marrying Darcy, she succeeds in escaping from, and in putting so much distance between, herself and Mrs. Bennet.

NOTES

1. London, Picador, 1992, p. 531.
2. This paper, substantially expanded, will be found in my *Recreating Jane Austen*, Cambridge: CUP, 2001.
3. See Paula Bennett, "Family Plots: *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel about parenting," in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Marcia McClintock Folsom, MLA 1993.

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