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Mary, Mary Quite Contrary:

Why Mary Bennet is the Unsung Hero of *Pride and Prejudice*

Mary Bennet is easily one of the most overlooked characters within Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and she is certainly the most overlooked Bennet sister. Not only does she not leave much of an impression on the reader, but she is a clear example of "Middle Child Syndrome," with Lizzy being Mr. Bennet's clear favorite, and Jane being Mrs. Bennet's. However, I would argue that Mary is the most heroic character throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. Mary serves a purpose as one of the most introspective and philosophical characters in Austen's work. She exhibits a strong sense of self, a moral compass, and a robust will that none of the other characters truly abide by.

To begin, I want to clarify why none of the other Bennet sisters are truly heroic in the novel. Jane Bennet simply wants to marry Mr. Bingley, and she doesn't have much of a character outside of that. Her primary characteristics are of her beauty and grace, and she is quite popular at the balls. She doesn't serve much of a role as a hero, and instead, she has most of her problems solved by Elizabeth, rather than herself. Kitty and Lydia certainly do not display many heroic characteristics. Their primary goals throughout the book are to meet military men and follow their mother's dream for them to become married, to the point where Lydia ends up needing to be rescued from her relationship with Wickham.

However, Elizabeth is the character most prominently referenced as the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, so disputing that becomes my primary objective. Within her critical essay "Feminisms," Vivien Jones claims that Elizabeth first asserts her autonomy over Mr. Collins' proposal by using "Wollstonecraftian terms" (359). Elizabeth says, "Do not consider me now as

an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (79). This claims that she is trying to distinguish herself from the typical female role by establishing her own authority. However, she truly doesn't have much authority because she is known mainly through relation to her father, Mr. Collins, and eventually Mr. Darcy. Mary, on the other hand, is known through her relationships to Mr. Collins and her father, but she remains single throughout the entirety of the book. In fact, she shows apathy about marriage as a whole, even remarking about the societal obligations: “I think it is no sacrifice to join occasionally in evening engagements. Society has claims on us all; and I profess myself one of those who consider intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable for everybody” (63). Through this discussion of dances, we learn that Mary understands the societal expectations for her, and she autonomously chooses to attend them. She identifies that society expects things of everyone, and through her analysis of this, she decides the dance is not disagreeable to her morals.

Furthermore, she has many instances where she decides society's expectations are not what she would like them to be. For example, she states “Far be it from me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasures. They would doubtless be congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess they would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book” (153). Here, Mary is discussing their trip to visit Mr. Collins and Charlotte, and she asserts how distinguished she is from most women of the time. Instead of taking part in the traditional female journey, Mary is content reading and studying. Additionally, Jones notes that although Elizabeth is clearly not economically independent, she asserts moral and intellectual independence (359). However, Mary Bennet surely asserts her own moral and intellectual independence to an even greater degree.

Mary's main characterization revolves around her love and study of literature. The narration claims that she "had neither genius nor taste" (18), and "being the only plain one in the family" (18). However, she does have key moments of intellect and clarity beyond what she is given credit for. For example, early on in *Pride and Prejudice* Mary comments on the concept of pride, before Elizabeth considers the nature of it:

"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 opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." (15)

From this discussion, Mary has clearly pondered and considered the trait of pride in a critical lens, and her time dedicated to research and reading has not gone in vain. Additionally, the statement of "vanity to what we would have others think of us" lends itself immediately to the reaction of Elizabeth when Darcy calls her simply tolerable. Lizzy is consistently concerned with the opinions of others about her social standing, but Mary shows no such interest in opinions of herself. She does perform and sing in order to achieve recognition, but she does so because of the absence of recognition within her family.

Within an article in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, scholar Hui-Chun Chang writes, "Elizabeth is aware of Mr. Darcy's higher station and prideful nature, yet she still boldly crosses social boundaries to articulate her opinions and ridicule Mr. Darcy and others" (78). Chang claims this as being an example of Elizabeth clear

feminist heroism. However, Mary also crosses social boundaries by refusing to marry altogether, and instead pursuing her own interests and ambitions. She isn't completely undesirable, as she is remarked as being "the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood" (Austen 9), and instead of pursuing a romantic relationship with any man, in order to increase her social standing, she pursues her own passions: reading and music. She does attempt to display these accomplishments for recognition by others; however because she isn't naturally gifted and she "worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments" (Austen 18), she wants to receive admiration and acknowledgement for her hard work and dedication. She isn't very good during her performances, but she doesn't let this discourage her. She enjoys music and singing, so she plays music and sings, for her own happiness.

During the finale of Austen's novel, "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" (264). She is not claimed as being unable to become accomplished, rather she chooses to remain home in order to help her mother. Lizzy is constantly claimed as being strong-willed and independent, but these traits lead her towards pleasing others and are only in relation to how other people view her. Elizabeth does choose to follow her ambitions, but they lead her to being subservient, at least socially and economically, to Mr. Darcy, whereas Mary has no such claim.

Although she is labeled as plain and untalented, Mary doesn't let anyone else's opinion of her get her down. Instead, she persists with hobbies and tasks that she enjoys, regardless of the societal expectation for women like her. Although Elizabeth is a fine character in her own right, she cares a considerable amount about what others see in her. Beginning with Darcy at the introductory ball, to her aversion to Collins' proposal, she could've been far less concerned with

their opinions of her, like Mary, but instead she submits to the very definition of vanity provided by Mary herself. Although Mary is the most forgotten Bennet sister, she is quite honestly the most progressive character in the novel.

Works Cited

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