

JANE AUSTEN, "A JUDICIOUS PERSON WITH SOME TURN FOR HUMOR"

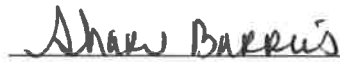
A Thesis

by

Melanie McLaughlin

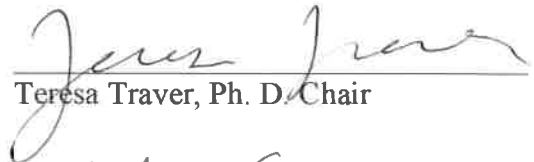
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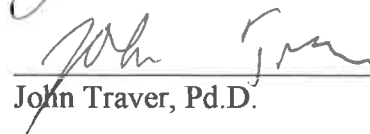


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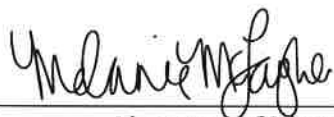
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Jane Austen, “A Judicious Person With Some Turn for Humor”

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A Thesis  
Presented  
to the Faculty of  
California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English

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by  
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Summer 2019

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, the most judicious woman I've known,  
to my children, and to my dad.

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## ABSTRACT

JANE AUSTEN, “A JUDICIOUS PERSON WITH SOME TURN FOR HUMOR”

by

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Master of Arts in English

California State University, Chico

Summer 2019

This thesis discusses Jane Austen’s use of humor in her written works and the role humor plays to impart moral lessons to her readers. I borrow from a quote in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to examine Austen’s judiciousness and humor in her narration, satire of human follies, and character comparisons. As a satirist, Austen enables readers to laugh at human foolishness through her characters’ ridiculousness and to privately examine their own antics. By juxtaposing her foolish characters with wiser and more teachable characters, Austen encourages readers to reform, to judge independently, and to treat others with sympathy.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*“I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can,”* (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 108).

Follies, nonsense, whims, and inconsistencies abound in human nature, and have been the subject of ridicule for centuries, whether in casual conversation or published literary works. Jane Austen, author of six complete novels during her lifetime, has attracted readers’ and scholars’ attention for over two hundred years. Austen’s sharp wit and quick humor engages reader interest and contrasts the didactic styles of moral teaching and social judgment of her day. Austen relies on elements of comedy--happy endings, ridiculous characters, and satire--to share stories and lessons of human relationships. Enjoyment is found in laughter, and Austen excels at creating ridiculous characters for readers to enjoy. Austen subjects both heroines and villains alike to ridicule in one form or another, and readers are invited to laugh with them at times, and at them in other situations. As entertaining as it is to laugh at blunders in Austen’s works, Austen’s writing has a greater purpose than merely amusement. Austen intends to create familiarity and trust with her readers in order to impart moral lessons through laughter.

Austen’s comedy reflects the satirical mood of the long eighteenth century. Satirizing vices in human behavior certainly entertains, but also enlightens, by encouraging self-reflection and reform. Seventeenth century plays and novels relied heavily on satire to entertain audiences

and readers. Jonathan Swift, a popular satirist of the eighteenth century, claims that one purpose of satire “is a *public Spirit*, prompting Men of Genius and Virtue, to mend the World as far as they are able,” (*Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, The Intelligencer Numb. III*). Swift further discusses satire in *The Battle of the Books*, as “a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own,” (*Tale 215*) indicating the human proclivity of laughing at others’ follies without recognizing the same behavior in one’s self. Swift recognizes the public aspect of satire in the contagious effects of laughter within a group, as well as in the potential for influence of a community or social class.

In interacting with Swift’s comments on satire, Henry Fielding defines the purpose of a satirist in *Joseph Andrews*, as one who holds “the glass to thousands in their closets, that they may contemplate their deformity, and endeavour to reduce it, and thus by suffering private mortification may avoid public shame,” (Book 3 ch 1). Satirists, therefore, in Fielding’s definition, mend the world by kindly inviting reform, “privately correct[ing] the fault” to avoid public shame, much like a parent, (Book 3 ch 1). Swift’s “public spirit” and Fielding’s private correction can take place simultaneously as an individual publicly views a satirical play or engages in reading a popular novel, while internally recognizing his or her own face in the glass which the stage/novel character holds up to view.

Where satirists, such as Austen and Fielding, use ridicule and laughter to criticize human whims and inconsistencies, conduct books prescribe appropriate social behavior. William St. Clair “estimates that between 1785 and 1820, somewhere between 59,500 and 119,000 copies of conduct or advice books were sold to a population of some 320,000 families with incomes of

at least £65 per year,” (Ford 505). Considering the number of conduct books printed, St. Clair argues “that a high proportion of the upper and middle classes must have owned copies of at least one advice book,” (Ford 505). The Bennet family from *Pride and Prejudice* procured Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*, which ranked third in conduct books printed, after Dr. Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* and Hester Mulso Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (Ford 505). Austen places Fordyce’s *Sermons* in the Bennet home to establish its common usage of the time and to satirize its effects on the Bennet daughters. While the Bennets own, and have likely read from *Sermons to Young Women* previously, they choose a novel over *Sermons* for Mr. Collins to read aloud to them. Mr. Collins prefers Fordyce’s *Sermons*, commenting that “there can be nothing so advantageous to [young ladies] as instruction,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 134). Austen’s appropriation of Fordyce’s *Sermons* demonstrates the two dynamics surrounding reading in the early nineteenth century: a young woman’s preferred reading material included the enjoyment of popular novels while the social mores indicated that reading for young women should be for instructional purposes rather than leisure.

Conduct books, directed at women, encouraged social etiquette and educational progress, and condemned novel reading as an idle activity. Both time and money factored in to the luxury of reading novels. Wealthy and gentry classes, especially women, enjoyed a surplus of time with which they could dedicate to reading for entertainment, but the working classes expended their hours of the day in cooking, cleaning, employment, and other everyday tasks. In addition to a surplus of time, a surplus of money was required to indulge in recreational reading.

According to Erickson, books were luxuries, and were also rising in cost, “so that to have an extensive library was a sign of great wealth. The average three-volume novel cost a guinea in 1815, or, based on the current worth of a guinea's gold content, roughly the equivalent of \$100 today,” (577). While many family libraries contained books from previous generations, current owners elected against purchasing novels simply due to the cost.

In addition to the expense associated with reading novels, many people opposed the idea of young women reading novels, attributing the habit at best to promote idleness, and at worst, immorality, (Erickson 583). Samuel Taylor Coleridge “declares that novel reading reconciles ‘indulgence of sloth and hatred of vacancy,’ and he considers it no better than ‘gaming, swinging or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking,’” (qtd. in Erickson 583). As many novels were “manufactured to order” (Erickson 582) to please readers’ tastes, novels were viewed to cater to whims and fancies, rather than to educate and form, as conduct books intended. Others associated novel reading with romantic notions and daydreams, a connection which Austen addresses in *Northanger Abbey*. In the *Annotated Pride and Prejudice*, Shapard notes that Fordyce claims the nature of novels to be shameful and to violate decorum, so that “she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 135). With such strong sentiment against novel reading and the high cost of purchasing novels, those who desired to read novels relied on circulating libraries to procure them.

Circulating libraries facilitated the reading of novels by offering copies to rent in exchange for a monthly subscription fee. Library practices contributed to the idle reputation

associated with reading novels. Libraries rented new novels for two to six days, requiring a period of time to be devoted to reading within a few short days (Erickson 580). Additionally, new novels maintained popularity for only a few months. In consequence, libraries bound novels in “cheap marble-colored bindings” (Erickson 579), while a book such as Fordyce’s *Sermons* was “sold in fine bindings, . . . an indication that they were meant to be kept and consulted,” (St. Clair, qtd. in Ford, 505). Novels were seldom read more than once, perpetuating the association of wasteful reading. Library lending practices, fleeting fashion, and bindings all contributed to the novel’s transient, and therefore, imprudent reputation.

The novel’s popularity created tension with the social conduct of the time, enabling circulating libraries to both promote novels and defend moral tradition. Aware of the social stigma associated with reading novels, libraries advertised more reputable books as well. Austen notes the varying preferences for novel reading in a letter to her sister Cassandra by reporting that Mrs. Martin’s library advertised not only novels, but “every kind of Literature &c &c-- She might have spared this pretension to *our* family who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so;--but it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her Subscribers,” (Austen and Le Faye 26). Austen’s notice of pretense in Mrs. Martin’s advertising indicates that the primary appeal for circulating libraries is in acquiring novels<sup>1</sup>. While Austen and her family

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Price finds refuge in the circulating library’s selection of classic books while staying at Portsmouth. Having been accustomed to a large library at Mansfield Park, Fanny missed her books. She took advantage of the selection to compensate for the lack of literature available in her birth home, both to read for herself and to educate Susan. Austen’s inclusion of Fanny’s intellectual use of the library demonstrates the viability of Mrs. Martin’s advertisement for every type of literature. However, the more common use of the library is noted in Catherine’s and Isabella’s discussion of novels in *Northanger Abbey* and in Lydia’s excitement over the officers who frequent the establishment.

declare themselves great novel-readers, others hide their interest in novels to appear socially appropriate, an idea which is further explored in chapter two of this thesis. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen laments the novel's reception as a "species of composition [which] has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers," (32). Such mixed reception for novels elicited not only the previously mentioned criticisms, but also remedies for novel reading.

While some conduct books advocated abstinence from novel reading, other critics, recognizing the popularity of novels, encouraged a more humorous approach. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft acknowledges a benefit of reading novels, if read judiciously and with humor. She proposes:

The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them; not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out, both by tones and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments (308).

Wollstonecraft's recommendation accepts the popularity of novels and works within the perimeter of novel readers, rather than criticizing from outside the niche. She calls for ridicule, through tone and comparison, as the remedy to novel reading, keeping in line with both Swift's and Fielding's reasoning for satire. Wollstonecraft calls upon readers of novels to

ridicule the novels themselves, attributing the novels’ “stale tales,” “meretricious scenes,” and “sentimental jargon” to “stupid novelists, who, [know] little of human nature,” (Wollstonecraft section 2). Wollstonecraft’s 1792 publication of *Vindication* likely influenced Austen’s viewpoints. Miriam Ascarelli writes convincingly of the feminist connection between the two published authors<sup>2</sup>, but I look instead at connections leading to Austen’s writing style. Austen’s realism and humor align with Wollstonecraft’s dislike for stale tales. Rather than reading novels with a tone of ridicule, Austen chose to write novels judiciously and satirically, thereby achieving Wollstonecraft’s goal of “just opinions” over “romantic sentiments” for readers.

Much of Austen’s success in humor is attributed to her flawed characters. During correspondence with Fanny Knight, Austen discusses her lifelike depiction of characters, admitting that “pictures of perfection, as you know, make me sick and wicked,” (Austen and Le Faye 335). Austen prefers realistic, imperfect characters who develop over the story arc. Regarding one of Anna Austen’s characters, Austen writes to her niece, “Henry Mellish will be, I am afraid, too much in the common novel style,—a handsome, amiable, unexceptionable young man (such as do not much abound in real life), desperately in love and all in vain,” (Austen and Le Faye 277). All of Austen’s heroines are flawed, and through these flaws, she can laugh at their mistakes and encourage readers to do so along with her, as Wollstonecraft recommended. We laugh at Catherine’s imagination, Elizabeth’s pride, Emma’s meddling, and Fanny’s naiveté. Benditt notes that “Austen evaluates people in terms of the degree or quality of their impulses, sentiments, feelings, affectations, thoughts, principles, prejudices, sense of duty, self-knowledge,

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<sup>2</sup> Ascarelli suggests that while Austen’s family had ties to Mary Wollstonecraft and Austen likely knew of Wollstonecraft’s viewpoints, Austen chose to keep her association quiet, due in large part to the political and social climate of Wollstonecraft’s post-mortem radical reputation.



self-command, spirit, and discipline,” (249). The glass which Austen holds up for her readers reflects the realistic tendencies in her characters that we recognize in ourselves. Austen’s laughter at her heroines intends to educate. While she laughs at their idiosyncrasies, and often allows those tendencies to remain unresolved in the novel’s resolution, she encourages reform in moral behavior.

In this thesis, I examine Austen’s lessons through laughter with Wollstonecraft’s quote in mind. While Wollstonecraft envisions a reader who ridicules a novel through tone and comparisons, Austen writes novels which ridicule the romantic mawkishness and sentimental jargon against which Wollstonecraft warns. Austen skillfully creates judicious, diverting novels which both educate and entertain her readers. Both Wollstonecraft and Austen promote the idea of women as strong-minded, capable, and purposeful in society. Ascarelli purports that Austen “managed to infuse her books with a Wollstonecraft-like feminist critique that is less politically charged but just as potent,” (4). We realize the potency of Austen’s work in her ability to teach through humor. Scholars examine family dynamics, women and marriage, character traits, Austen’s conclusions, social classes, work opportunities, and a myriad of other themes in Austen’s writings, but the enduring appeal to and influence of Austen’s novels lies in her humor.

The body chapters of my thesis break apart Wollstonecraft’s quote and examine elements of her recommendation within Austen’s writings. Chapter two of my thesis establishes Austen as Wollstonecraft’s “judicious person” and as authorial narrator of her novels. Drawing on Brian Boyd’s 2017 article concerning Austen’s narrators, I discuss Austen’s storytelling style in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. The two novels depict differing levels of involvement in the

narration, demonstrating Austen's perception and intelligence in the art of storytelling. I chose to examine these specific novels due to Boyd's reliance on *Emma*, and due to the strong narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen's wit is recognized in all her narrations, but the bold and direct narrative tact taken in *Northanger* distinguishes itself from any other Austen work. Austen's humor, intelligence, and judgment comes through clearly in both novels. Viewing Jane Austen as the narrator of her novels creates greater trust in her judiciousness and, consequently, in her satire.

Chapter three discusses Austen's "turn for humor," which is quickly recognized in the depiction of her characters. I focus on Mrs. Bennet, one of Austen's well known fools, to demonstrate the art of ridicule, a quality which Wollstonecraft recommends in creating just opinions. I incorporate Henry Fielding's comments on the *ridiculous* with John Lauber's, Ivor Morris's, and John Wiltshire's modern day opinions regarding Mrs. Bennet to show how Austen points out foolishness to her readers.

My fourth chapter focuses on Austen's use of "apt comparisons" in her characters. For every foolish character which Austen creates, she models a character of the same trait who reforms by novel's end. In doing so, Austen offers a sensible model for readers. This chapter focuses on sympathetic identity by examining three characters who do not exemplify the trait, alongside three characters who do, and the ensuing conclusion for the unreformed characters.

Austen's ability to engage readers in moral lessons through humor deflates Fordyce's association between novel reading and prostitution. Austen promotes the pastime of reading for

pleasure and education simultaneously, and in doing so, qualifies herself as a model of Wollstonecraft's "judicious person." For over two hundred years, readers have enjoyed and learned from Austen's satire, and we continue to do so, trusting her judgment and her laughter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### JANE AUSTEN, A JUDICIOUS PERSON

Examining Austen's lessons imparted through laughter requires first examining her narrative stance. Scholars have studied Austen's narrative voice at length, some establishing the omniscience of the narrator, some discussing the limited omniscient perspective, and at least one scholar measuring the distance of the limited omniscience to three miles of the protagonist, the approximate distance between Netherfield and Longbourn (Nelles 123). Other scholars discuss the vacuity or silence of the narrator (Austin-Bolt 271). And many scholars identify Austen as the first writer to "make sustained use of [Free Indirect Discourse]," (Austin-Bolt 273) an omniscient narrative style which moves in and out of characters' consciences, creating reader connection with characters and their experiences. Austen does not create a fictional first-person narrator, a character within the plot to relay the story development; therefore, scholars debate such ideas as the extent or limits of the third-person narrator's omniscience.

Despite the varying perspectives on which narrative stance Austen relies, scholars tend to agree that Austen's narrative voice is inviting, clever, and entertaining, simultaneously provoking laughter alongside a spirit of acceptance. Caroline Austin-Bolt notes that Austen's FID narration "enables a sense of sympathy, or even empathy, between narrator and character," (274). William Nelles speaks of Austen's omniscient narrator as "not at all a Godlike omniscience, but a very human skill: the ability of a perceptive and thoughtful person, given enough time and sufficient opportunity for observation, to make accurate judgments about people's character, thought processes, and feelings," (128). Tiffany Niebuhr furthers the idea of

Austen's humanity in describing the narrator in *Northanger Abbey* as one who appeals to a "humorous ethos. We grow to like and trust her as we laugh together at the excesses of the Gothic, the detractors of the novel, her own characters, and her playful moralizing," (150). The descriptions of Austen's narrators intimate a voice of personality, sympathy, and humor that can be trusted, even when some character or plot development information is withheld.

Humor that can be trusted is essential in Austen's works, for she relies on many types of humor. Readers quickly recognize Austen's propensity for laughter in her novels. She often laughs affectionately at characters, such as at Emma Woodhouse's single-mindedness or Catherine Moreland's imagination. Other times Austen's laughter is more ridiculing in tone, mocking, for example, Mr. Collins's absurdities or Mrs. Bennet's nerves. By incorporating different types of laughter, Austen accomplishes more than entertainment—Austen imparts moral lessons in the personal, trusted, safe space of laughter. Austen's gift as a writer lies in her ability to create intimate, trusted spaces, which invite readers into a familiar, safe relationship with her narrative voice. Recognizing Jane Austen as the risible narrator of her novels creates a closer connection between reader and author, allowing for an increased internalization of the lessons Austen imparts through laughter. Readers also recognize Austen's own human follies and pleasures, and her willingness to allow others the same.

Many scholars that discuss Austen's narrative voice note that in their estimation, the narrator is Jane Austen herself. "I take the narrator to be, if not identical, at least very close to Jane Austen herself and as such describe her with feminine pronouns," (Niebuhr 155). Nelles closes his discussion of Austen's omniscient narration with the following claim:

At the risk of making my conclusion too simple and obvious, the model for Austen's infallible narrators is not God in heaven, but Jane Austen, more or less as she describes herself in a letter to Cassandra, written about the time she begins working on *Emma*: “. . . as I must leave off being young, I find many Douceurs in being *a sort of Chaperon* for I am put on the Sofa near the Fire & can drink as much wine as I like” (Nelles 128, Nelles's emphasis).

In being “a sort of chaperon” in her novels, Austen as narrator leads the reader, through her engaging humor, toward the principles she values, and in “drinking as much wine” as she likes, Austen perpetuates a care-free, laissez-faire chaperone attitude. Readers recognize Austen's values across her writing (values such as relationships, independence, honesty, tolerance, and intelligence) without feeling didactically lectured or censured.

Identifying Austen as narrator connects readers directly to Jane Austen, to her character development, plot design and resolution. Niebuhr claims, “All writers and narrators must be rhetors who persuade their readers,” (1) but the credit or criticism of a novel's work does not rest with the narrator, but with the author. Simply stated, no one reads *Pride and Prejudice* and then exclaims about the narrator's talent for telling a story. Inserting a narrator between the reader and author dilutes the writer's persuasive power. Analyzing the three-mile radius of a narrator, for example, while interesting, distracts from the intended connections between two estates that exist three miles apart. The three-mile distance allows for Jane's travel on horseback, Elizabeth's independent walk, and further frequent interactions between the two locales. Brian

Boyd agrees that reading Austen's works from a framework of a third-person narrator, omniscient or otherwise, creates a distance between the reader and the storyteller. Boyd claims:

We engage with the mind of an author, especially with an author with a highly exceptional mind, in every sentence, in every move she makes, with her decisions as a story inventor and a storyteller, and we engage more deeply the more we return, the closer we look. We share in her creative choices. And we understand those choices, and engage with her more closely, if we know others of her works, and can compare and contrast her choices here with her choices elsewhere. In that, as in so many other respects, supposedly nonauthorial narrators, necessarily different from one fictional world to another, can only make fiction less engaging (304).

Boyd's claim simplifies the concept of authorial narrators<sup>3</sup> and promotes author/reader connection through engagement. Engaging with Austen, comparing and contrasting her choices across novels, and I add, understanding her laughter, instills confidence in her storytelling, and therefore, in her lessons. Jane Austen exemplifies tolerance and liberty in a society which valued conformity and dependence, and she promotes these ideals in her writing. While she creates a variety of characters, rich in idiosyncrasies and from differing classes and perspectives for readers to laugh at and learn from, Austen's viewpoints remain unchanging across her novels. For example, Austen values sensibility more than social status, honesty more than personal gain,

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<sup>3</sup> Frank K. Stanzel defines authorial narration in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* as a narrator who "sees the story from the ontological position of an outsider, that is, a position of absolute authority which allows her/him to know everything about events and characters, including their thoughts and unconscious motives," (364). Boyd defines authorial narration as simply the art of storytelling.

and laughter more than emotional drama. Reading Austen as an authorial narrator augments her progressive outlook, and maximizes her moral influence on trusting readers.

To examine how Austen imparts lessons through laughter, I look at her narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. These two novels model two differing styles. Much as a parent interacts differently with children based on disposition, Austen interacts differently with her protagonists, and therefore with her readers, based on personality. Catherine Moreland's romantic notions and maiden adventure align well with a strong, parodic narrative voice; it's easy to laugh kindly at youth and innocence from a vantage point of wisdom and experience. However, to incorporate that same voice in regards to Emma Woodhouse would create an entirely different, and likely antagonistic, novel due to Emma's establishment in her home and community. Alternatively, Austen's voice in *Emma* functions more as a guide, allowing Emma herself to be the stronger personality.

Austen's narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey* is both satirical and assertive. Austen ridicules the Gothic novel conventions of mystery and romance, especially in connection with Catherine Moreland's imagination. Her practical narration contrasts the conventional Gothic tone of suspense and supernatural, adding to the parody. For example, during Catherine's hopeful adventure to Blaize castle with John Thorpe, she is consistently troubled by her unintended offense to the Tilneys. Catherine's only solace to her trouble is her imagined happiness of exploring "a long suite of lofty rooms, exhibiting the remains of magnificent furniture, though now for many years deserted—the happiness of being stopped in their way along narrow, winding vaults, by a low, grated door; or even of having their lamp, their only lamp,



extinguished by a sudden gust of wind, and of being left in total darkness,” (Austen, *Northanger* 81). Austen’s narration mocks Catherine’s romantic notions of her beloved castle, as Blaize is actually a private summer house built in 1766 (Lane), and furthers the parody by denying Catherine the realization of her beloved adventure due to the very mundane, realistic detail that the party left too late in the day to complete the journey.

Austen’s satirical, assertive tone maintains an inviting, trusting nature, and presents a presence that’s almost as relevant as a character in the novel--not a character that moves the plot along, but one who observes the storyline and consistently makes asides to the reader. Austen’s narrative maintains reader confidence by inviting the reader to observe her heroine’s blunders, and by direct satirical conversation with the reader. As an undergraduate, I claimed that *Northanger Abbey*’s narrator served as the antagonist of the novel, not as the evil villain of the plot, but as someone who opposed Catherine Moreland’s imaginative fantasies of romance, suspense, and adventure. Picturing the witty, teasing narrator as Jane Austen herself creates a fitting image, one that progresses my undergraduate claim from narrator-as-antagonist to narrator-as-mentor.

Austen embraces the narrator-as-mentor role as a “sort of chaperon” who delights in witnessing Catherine’s follies. As author, Austen ensures that Catherine will never fail too spectacularly, while maintaining an amused viewpoint of Catherine’s hopes. Catherine anticipates her first adventure to Bath with “eager delight,” yet Austen satirizes Catherine’s hope for dramatic adventure, pointing out the lack of familial sentiment at parting as well as the “suitable quietness and uneventful safety,” of the journey (Austen, *Northanger* 13), otherwise

opportune scenes for heroic theatrics. Austen continues to affectionately mock Catherine's hopes for heroic adventure at her first ball. Catherine naturally longs to dance, but instead spends the evening with Mrs. Allen, who is more interested in preserving the lace on her gown than on making social connection, and who ineffectually repeats placid wishes that Catherine had a dance partner. After tea, when the ball begins to break up, Austen notes:

Now was the time for a heroine, who had not yet played a very distinguished part in the events of the evening, to be noticed and admired. Every five minutes, by removing some of the crowd, gave greater openings for her charms. She was now seen by many young men who had not been near her before. Not one, however, started with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity by anybody. (*Northanger* 18)

Austen perpetuates an affectionate, teasing attitude toward Catherine by continuing and increasing the opportunity for notice and admiration, without result. Catherine's experience with romance and veneration fall far short of her expectations.

Much of Catherine's fantasy and expectations result from her avid reading of gothic novels. *The Spectator*, a periodical which published articles on manners, morals, and literature, similar to the conduct books of the time, cautioned young women, such as Catherine, against reading novels. *The Spectator's* April 12, 1711 edition describes the contents of a Lady's Library, belonging to a wealthy widow called Leonora. Intrigued by her selection of books, the author of the article laments that "as her Reading has lain very much among Romances, it has given her a very particular Turn of Thinking." The author questions, "What Improvements would

a Woman have made, who is so Susceptible of Impressions from what she reads, had she been guided to such Books as have a Tendency to enlighten the Understanding and rectify the Passions, as well as to those which are of little more use than to divert the Imagination?”

(*Spectator* No 37). Catherine’s mind is susceptible to impressions from the novels she reads, and Austen enjoys teasing her particular turn of thinking. Austen continually teases Catherine for her imagination and expectations, not in an evil derisive manner, but in an entertaining, appreciative, almost mentor-esque manner. She includes the reader in this authoritative view of Catherine to appreciate the ridiculousness of teen-age girl fantasies.

Austen also endears Catherine to the reader. Readers are not meant to *only* believe that Catherine has naïve expectations, but also to recognize her innocence and goodness. Catherine’s reaction to the disappointment of her first ball demonstrates the qualities Austen admires in her heroine. Catherine’s single solace from the evening’s adventures was overhearing two young men call her “pretty,” and this simple praise gave her more satisfaction than “a true-quality heroine would have been for fifteen sonnets in celebration of her charms” (Austen, *Northanger* 18). The gap between what Catherine seeks and what Catherine receives is disparate, yet Catherine treasures a simple, one-word compliment as a satisfying end to her first romantic adventure. We laugh at Catherine’s romantic expectations, but admire her simplicity, even while perhaps laughing a bit at how little attention this heroine requires.

Austen’s authoritative laughter cues the reader to perception of character. Austen’s laughter toward Catherine indicates affection, an emotion which Austen reinforces through Henry Tilney’s treatment toward Catherine. Catherine’s first impression of Tilney noted “an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her,”

(Austen, *Northanger* 19). Tilney's archness, or mischievous irony as it is defined in the footnote, and Catherine's resulting lack of understanding mirror the relationship between Austen's narration and Catherine's experiences. Catherine can hardly understand the naive expectations of her imagination, and Austen takes advantage of this to laugh affectionately at her innocence. Tilney enjoys a similar stance when he teases Catherine regarding journal writing (Austen, *Northanger* 21-22), her amusements at home (Austen, *Northanger* 73), and a miscommunication with Miss Tilney over an expected publication of a novel (Austen, *Northanger* 106). Austen affectionately mocks the relationship between Catherine and Tilney in noting that "Catherine did not know her advantages--did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man," (Austen, *Northanger* 104). Tilney rather enjoys educating Catherine's inexperienced mind on his views of picturesque landscapes. Austen's laughter shows appreciation for Catherine's goodness and innocence, both from her stance as narrator and from Tilney's stance as potential lover.

In contrast to Austen's affectionate laughter toward Catherine, her laughter toward other characters insinuates aversion. Austen continually laughs at Mrs. Allen for her sole focus on fashion; John Thorpe is ridiculed for his fabrications of his horse's speed, which is quickly corrected by James Moreland; Isabella is mocked for her false protests toward young men which she wishes would pursue her; even General Tilney's authoritative pride is subject to caricature. Austen's mockery in these instances reveals a more wicked sense of laughter, as Austen confidently gossips with her readers and encourages us to laugh at prideful conduct.

Austen's gossip is reminiscent of her letters to her sister. From one evening at a ball, she describes to Cassandra a woman with a "broad face, ... pink husband, & fat neck," a woman

whose husband is “ugly enough; uglier even than his cousin John;” and three young women with whom she was “as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me,” (Austen and Le Faye 61). In her letters, Austen feels secure in sharing her sharp-witted descriptions with her trusted confidante, and she shares the same trust and confidence with her readers. This intimate connection between reader and author maintains a moral lesson. We understand, for example, from Mrs. Allen’s fashion obsession that it’s better to attend to a young girl at her first ball than to the potential tearing of her lace gown (Austen, *Northanger* 16-17). And we know full well that Thorpe’s vaunting of his horse’s speed does nothing to gain Catherine’s (or our) affection. Austen, as *Northanger Abbey*’s scintillating narrator, delights in the wealth of ridicule available in her characters and relishes sharing the parody with readers, mending the world of vanity as far as she is able, through laughter.

The same satirical, assertive voice that mocks vanity works equally well to defend novels. In her stand-out first-person declaration regarding novels in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen defends novel reading by satirizing novel reading. Comparing reading novels to reading *The Spectator*, Austen claims that though the latter reading may present an image of an educated mind, it can hardly interest the mind as does a novel, “in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language,” (Austen, *Northanger* 32). Austen’s affirmative but exaggerated language reveals her own love of reading, and invites laughter at her affectation. Austen claims to display the greatest powers of the mind—her mind—as she argues the merits of novels. She is, in this moment, parodying the very vanity she mocks in John Thorpe. Aware of the trends of the day

regarding novel reading, Austen relies on laughter to defend and promote writing and reading novels.

Austen further promotes the pastime of reading novels in *Northanger Abbey* through her characters' reading habits. She models sensibility and eschews foolishness through the characters of Henry Tilney and John Thorpe. Henry Tilney, a model of sensibility and intelligence, claims to have read "hundreds and hundreds" of novels (Austen, *Northanger* 14), while John Thorpe categorizes most novels, including *Udolpho*, as "full of nonsense and stuff" and the "stupidest things in creation," (Austen, *Northanger* 43). His foolishness is exposed a moment later as he claims to only read novels by Mrs. Radcliffe, who, unknown to Thorpe, wrote *Udolpho*.

The same themes of sensibility and foolishness associated with reading novels manifest in Catherine's character development. *Northanger Abbey* satirizes the potential hazards of novel reading by establishing a heroine who confuses reality with imagination, learned from the fiction of novels. Catherine fantasizes over "the delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, as her fancy represented Blaize Castle to be," (Austen, *Northanger* 79), though she never actually arrived at Blaize Castle. Upon searching an ebony cabinet at Northanger Abbey, Catherine's "heart fluttered, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale. She seized, with an unsteady hand, the precious manuscript," (Austen, *Northanger* 159), inventing it to be the lost manuscript teasingly prophesied by Henry, but disappointed to discover instead a collection of washing-bills. Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine craves a true gothic experience, but is continually met with ordinary, mundane results.

Austen's satire ridicules Catherine's imagination and simultaneously defends the pastime of reading novels by developing the fantasy-minded heroine into a sensible, practical young woman. In contrast to Catherine's maiden and uneventful expedition to Bath, Catherine's journey home is a true, gothic-heroic experience. Catherine is cast out of Northanger Abbey, penniless and unprotected on her journey home, but as a rejected and heartbroken young woman, she is completely unaware of the dramatic, heroic opportunity. In this satirical move, Austen demonstrates a shift from Catherine's fictionally influenced, fantasy-filled imagination to genuine, emotional response and true-life experience.

A description of Catherine's last night in the abbey demonstrates the reality of emotion over fantasy:

That room, in which her disturbed imagination had tormented her on her first arrival, was again the scene of agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers. Yet how different now the source of her inquietude from what it had been then—how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building, were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high, and often produced strange and sudden noises throughout the house, she heard it all as she lay awake, hour after hour, without curiosity or terror (Austen, *Northanger* 213).

The reality and substance of dishonor and embarrassment now supersede all superstition and fantasies in Catherine's mind. Of course, the reader feels sympathy for Catherine's disappointment and embarrassment, but also appreciates Austen's clever use of

heightened emotion. At the occurrence of heroic adventure which Catherine has anticipated, she is naïve to the experience. Catherine's heartbreak, accompanied by fear of an unknown offence on her part, pushes her mind past the potential heroic plight which held "no terrors for her; she began it without either dreading its length, or feeling its solitariness," (Austen, *Northanger* 216). Our heroine, consumed with the realities of her emotions, no longer imagines—or even recognizes—the danger of adventure. Catherine's development from fantasy-minded heroine to real-life emotional young woman establishes her as a sensible seventeen-year-old, suitable for the expected engagement to Henry, despite her mother's prediction that Catherine would be a "sad, heedless young housekeeper" requiring practice (Austen, *Northanger* 233). Austen's satire continually teases Catherine's hopes, dousing optimism with reality, yet ultimately developing a plot which rewards Catherine's realistic dreams.

In contrast to the satirical, assertive narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's narrative voice in *Emma* acts as a guide, gaining reader confidence through inclusion in Emma's learning, first as observer, then as participant. Austen shares varying degrees of detail with the reader to accentuate Emma's flawed perspective. At times, we laugh at Emma's blindness, thinking we as readers see more clearly than does the heroine (an ironic example of common pride which Austen ridicules); at other times, we willingly follow Emma's perspective, thereby blinding ourselves to details that literally are before our eyes. Examining specific examples from the novel will demonstrate this discrepancy.

In an early dialogue between Emma and Mr. Elton, the narrative voice maintains Emma's perspective, but gives enough details that readers understand circumstances before Emma is aware of them:



“You have given Miss Smith all that she required,” said he; “you have made her graceful and easy. She was a beautiful creature when she came to you, but, in my opinion, the attractions you have added are infinitely superior to what she received from nature.”

“I am glad you think I have been useful to her; but Harriet only wanted drawing out, and receiving a few, very few hints. She had all the natural grace of sweetness of temper and artlessness in herself. I have done very little.”

“If it were admissible to contradict a lady,” said the gallant Mr. Elton (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 70).

Mr. Elton continues to commend Emma on her success with improving Miss Smith, and ends his compliments “with a sort of sighing animation, which had a vast deal of the lover,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 70-71). Despite Mr. Elton’s continued professions regarding Emma’s success, Emma points the focus back to Harriet’s achievements and dismisses her own contributions. Emma ignores Elton’s gallant gesture of refusing to contradict her, though he wanted to. Shepard notes that contradicting a woman went against male courtesy and gallantry, and that “Mr. Elton is devoted to such gallantry, especially toward Emma. His insistence that Emma’s contributions to Harriet’s attractions exceed Harriet’s own represents a significant hint of his real feelings, a hint that Emma ignores,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 71). Indeed, Emma ignores all of Mr. Elton’s hints and sighing animations. She chooses to not see Mr. Elton’s intentions, even while wondering at his raptures over a painting of Harriet to be done by Emma. Admonishing him in her thoughts, she instructs, “Don’t pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet’s face,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 72). While her thoughts allow

a bit of comprehension, Emma's own determined matchmaking plan refuses to recognize that his sighing animations are intended for herself. Despite Emma's blindness to Mr. Elton's attentiveness, the perceptive reader realizes his intentions, notices his emphasis on Emma's accomplishments rather than Harriet's character, and recognizes his loving sigh as satisfaction in Emma's character. A man expressing his ardent compliments to the woman he loves is difficult to miss, unless you're Emma Woodhouse.

Narrative voice draws attention to the differing perspectives in this dialogue. As readers, we laugh at Emma's blindness to a situation that is clear to both Mr. Knightley and Mr. John Knightley, as well as to the reader. In the examples of Emma's interaction with Mr. Elton, Austen includes the reader in the secret, so to speak, which the narrative voice establishes. It's as if Austen wants us as readers to laugh along with her at Emma's narrowly focused perspective. Readers are more aware than Emma herself of Mr. Elton's growing attachment to her. Reader suspicions of this attachment are increasingly strengthened as both Mr. Knightley and John Knightley caution Emma regarding Mr. Elton's design, and finally confirmed when Mr. Elton chooses to attend the dinner rather than visit Harriet, who has taken ill. The narrative informs the reader to the dynamic while maintaining Emma's perspective; however, readers are meant to understand what Emma does not, and to anticipate the inevitable awkward reveal of Mr. Elton's affections and Emma's disinterest. Through laughter, we grow confident in our own perspective, believing that we have a superior understanding to Emma's own. Austen intends readers to feel confident. In doing so, we learn about vanity by observing Emma's blunders, and also set ourselves up for own blunders in perspective.

A second example illustrates the willingness with which readers accept Emma's perspective with limited details. Specific points concerning Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are shared "in such a casual and inconsequential fashion that we pay little attention," (Boyd 292). For example, details about Frank and Jane's meeting at Weymouth serve only to further the mystery surrounding the enigmatic Frank Churchill (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 294-6), and later to encourage Emma's gossip concerning Mr. Dixon and Jane (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 382). Readers willingly follow Emma's perspective concerning Frank and Jane. According to Emma, Frank is intriguing and charming, while Jane is tedious and poor.

One specific sentence demonstrates the tendency for Emma (as well as the reader) to overlook details that don't fit into perspective. During the dinner at the Coles's home, while discussing the mystery of who could have sent Jane the pianoforte, Emma is entreated to perform on the Coles's instrument. This sentence follows: "Frank Churchill, of whom, in the eagerness of [Emma's] conversation with Mrs. Weston, she had been seeing nothing, except that he had found a seat by Miss Fairfax, followed Mr. Cole, to add his very pressing entreaties" (Austen, *Annotated Emma*, 398-400). Boyd argues, "Frank's having taken a seat beside Jane offers readers a little clue to their relationship. But it is a clue fleetingly dropped and quickly dispelled by his joining Mr. Cole to encourage Emma to play the piano, and then singing along with her," (294). As Boyd points out, readers dismiss the fact that Frank Churchill sits beside Jane before entreating Emma to sing. Confident in our perceptive abilities, we trust the developing attentions between Frank and Emma, and dismiss seemingly minor details. Boyd concludes that "the narrator of this novel seems to want us both to have little fragments of evidence and not to register them fully yet," (Boyd 295). Another possible conclusion is that Austen allows us as

readers to come to the full realization in our own time, as she does with Emma. In contrast to the obvious details Austen shares with readers concerning Mr. Elton's affections, details concerning Frank's affection are obscured.

In examining moments in which Austen includes or excludes the reader from understanding crucial plot information, I conclude that Austen intends the reader to learn through Emma's ridiculousness as well as through our own. We learn, initially as observers, by watching Emma's fateful steps forward, anticipating the lessons which await her. This is an essential developmental move on Austen's part. By first laughing with Austen at Emma's foolishness, we learn to trust Jane Austen. We share confidences with her, and understand that her laughing at Emma is harmless. We believe, along with Austen, that Emma will learn to look outside of her own perspective to see other people's experiences. To gain the reader's confidence is an essential step in Austen's intent to then draw the reader into a perspective of learning the lessons *alongside* Emma, as a participant rather than an observer.

By engaging the reader in differing levels of narrative detail, Austen allows readers to learn at times by noting Emma's foolishness, and at others by feeling foolish themselves. Emma's conduct toward Miss Bates demonstrates this deeper level of instruction from Austen to her readers. Emma's opinion regarding Miss Bates is discussed with Harriet, who predicts that Emma will "be an old maid at last, like Miss Bates," (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 148). Emma rejects any potential likeness with Miss Bates, a person "so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious—and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body.... But between *us*, I am convinced there never can be any likeness, except in being

unmarried,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 148). Emma’s opinion of Miss Bates, though critical, is acceptable in this private exchange with her friend. Readers tend to agree with Emma’s viewpoint of the tiring, never-ending, ingratiating commentary which Miss Bates effuses. Our agreement with Emma in this stance positions us as readers to learn, not as observers of Emma’s misstep, but as participants with her.

The scene in which Emma publicly mocks Miss Bates is “the novel’s shocking moral center,” in part, Boyd claims, because “*we as readers* have probably been no more conscious of the cruelty of Emma’s behaviour than she herself has,” (Boyd 298 original emphasis). Some readers, however, dislike Emma for her cruel behavior long before she injures Miss Bates during the Box Hill trip. These readers likely learn only from observation, not participation. Other readers, who may sympathize with Emma or who may tire of Miss Bates themselves, learn by participating with Emma in her unidentified insult. Austen distracts the reader “in the off-key attempts at repartee, in the puzzling currents between Frank, Jane, and Emma, so that we do not linger on Miss Bates and the pain Emma has caused her, until Mr. Knightley reproaches Emma and therefore us,” (Boyd 298). Readers, along with Emma, are censured for “being so insolent in...wit to a woman of [Miss Bates’s] character, age, and situation,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 664). This second example of narrative distraction functions not simply as plot development, but as a moral lesson. In calling out Emma *and* the reader in their treatment of Miss Bates, both are reminded of the responsibility inherent in particular situations and toward particular people, regardless of how foolish those people may be.

The public nature of the insult seems to be a distinguishing feature in this lesson. Austen avoids censuring Emma in her private complaints regarding Miss Bates. Indeed, Emma’s

patience during interactions with Miss Bates often outlasts the reader's own. Seemingly, Austen approves of confident ridicule among friends, mirroring Swift's definition that satire allows us to laugh with friends in corners (Swift *Prose, The Intelligencer Numb. III*). In letters to her sister, Austen feels safe laughing with her sister at herself. Austen writes to Cassandra of beginning "operations on my hat, on which You know my principal hopes of happiness depend," (Austen and Le Faye 16), laughing at her reliance on fashion for general contentment. Additionally, Austen can speak freely, as when she relayed Mrs. Hall's miscarriage to Cassandra: "Mrs. Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. --I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband," (Austen and Le Faye 17). The familiarity which Austen shares with her family fosters a propensity for laughter, creating a safe place to laugh. She can laugh at a miscarriage without fear of judgment from her sister. However, some critics have judged her sharp wit in this instance as "moral inadequacy," (Spacks, "Austen's Laughter" 71). Had Austen's taunt been public, she could be judged as morally inadequate, but in the privacy of intimate confidence, Austen's mockery of a frightful husband should be recognized as a lesser evil. Emma's public insult of Miss Bates merits strong reproof, whereas her private complaints of Miss Bates are certainly the lesser evil. Potentially, Emma could have privately made the same remark concerning Miss Bates without incurring insult, or at least a lesser degree of insult. She certainly would be allowed to share the remark with Harriet in private without any insult. The public aspect creates the shame by calling general attention to Miss Bates's propensity for talking.

Austen as narrator reveals to readers Austen as a person. We grow comfortable with her humor. We laugh, usually kindly, with her at characters and we grow to trust her. Laughter alleviates stress, invites new perspective, and subdues apprehension. When allowed to laugh in private, trusted spaces, without judgement, individuals develop confidence and self-reflection. As Austen imparts lessons concerning vanity through laughter, we as readers learn through ridicule--learning to laugh at a naive heroine who we trust will mature into a sensible individual allows us to laugh at our own ridiculousness, and trust that we too will reform.

## CHAPTER THREE

### AUSTEN'S TURN FOR HUMOR IN RIDICULOUS RIVALS

Austen's ridicule of her characters is not limited to the heroes and heroines we admire. Austen's works are also rich in ridiculous rivals. Each of these antagonists are strong forces, consistent in their propensities, and memorable in their manners. In speaking of Austen's fools, John Lauber claims that "in them she displays a comic exuberance, a fertility of invention, for which she is seldom given credit" (511). Readers do not think of Miss Bates without recalling her animated, nonsensical ramblings, or of Mr. Collins without his reverential deference to Lady Catherine, or of Mrs. Bennet without her enthusiastic nerves and abundant social blunders. Like Elizabeth, Jane Austen exhibits "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 20). Austen's delight in ridiculous characters manifests in their consistent behavior, which Lauber references as "a fool through and through" and "always and nothing but a fool" (Lauber 511). Austen incorporates the consistency of fools in each of her novels, specifically in her antagonists' vain agendas and characteristics. While not every fool is antagonistic, every antagonist models a ridiculous characteristic or behavior which does not reform within the confines of the novel. Austen encourages decorum in her readers by creating antagonists with foolish, ridiculous notions and encouraging readers to laugh at their follies. In laughing at them, she encourages readers to form "just opinions" and find more appropriate models to follow.

Defining "ridiculous" clarifies Austen's turn for humor and her resulting morals for readers. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "ridiculous" as an adjective, meaning "arousing



or deserving mockery or derision; absurd, preposterous; risible.” Henry Fielding discusses the ridiculous in the preface to his novel, *Joseph Andrews*. Fielding claims that “the only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation.” This affectation, he continues, stems from two sources, vanity and hypocrisy. “Vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavor to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues” (preface). Mrs. Bennet impeccably exemplifies Fielding’s definition of the ridiculous. Vanity, more frequently displayed by Mrs. Bennet, compels her to extreme antics and to laud advantages over her neighbors, while hypocrisy causes her to ascribe her own unattractive attributes to others.

Mrs. Bennet’s vanity and hypocrisy result in unfavorable, but comical behavior. Ivor Morris calls Mrs. Bennet “a force—erratic, and often perverse—to be reckoned with” (10). John Wiltshire agrees, expanding his description of Mrs. Bennet as “comical...[and] 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” (8). Wiltshire accurately describes Mrs. Bennet’s temperament, mind, and ambitions. However, what Morris and Wiltshire present as oppressive behavior is also considered and remembered among readers as ridiculous behavior. Mrs. Bennet’s oppressiveness is rooted in her vanity, which originates from her belief that she and her daughters are more beautiful than other women, and therefore more attractive to potential marriage partners. Austen ridicules Mrs. Bennet’s vanity and hypocrisy, caricaturing the foolish displays of her pride, along with her inability to reform.

Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* with Mrs. Bennet initiating a conversation with her husband regarding the new occupants of Netherfield Park. By presenting Mrs. Bennet as the first

character in the novel, Austen places her vanity center stage, both as a representation of “the surrounding families” and as an absurd character, immediately formulating how to claim the “single man in possession of a good fortune” as “the rightful property of some one or other of [her] daughters,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 2). As matriarch of five daughters, “the business of her life was to get her daughters married” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 6). Mrs. Bennet’s business motive and model reveal the extent of her vanity, which includes focusing on beauty, seeking a good fortune, and defending her own pride.

The currency which Mrs. Bennet relies on for her business transactions is beauty. Her own “youth and beauty” captured Mr. Bennet’s attention enough to ensure her marriage union. Mrs. Bennet declares to her husband, “I certainly *have* had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 4). In Mrs. Bennet’s mind, the possession of beauty has a shelf life and is used to most advantage during youth in the pursuit of a husband. However, this standard she preaches could also be false modesty, a likely intention on Austen’s behalf, since Mrs. Bennet thinks highly of herself. Mrs. Bennet prides herself, not only on the beauty of her daughters, but on the reputation of their beauty. Both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Collins, potential suitors in Mrs. Bennet’s mind, had heard of the Bennet daughters’ beauty, (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 14 and 124) a fact which Mrs. Bennet capitalized on in her interactions with the two young men.

Mrs. Bennet’s vanity regarding her daughters’ beauty exemplifies itself in both her conversations and judgments. Mrs. Bennet believes Jane, her eldest, is her most beautiful daughter, and most likely to marry well. Her belief motivates her to publicly vaunt Jane’s beauty

and prior suitors (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 82) while visiting Mr. Bingley's residence. Upon hearing that Mr. Bingley thought Jane to be the prettiest girl at the ball, Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, "Upon my word! Well, that is very decided indeed," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 34), immediately anticipating a marriage proposal to follow, but couching her expectations in front of the Lucases. Additionally, Mrs. Bennet will go so far as to publicly compare Jane's beauty to Charlotte Lucas's plainness: "But you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane's beauty. I do not like to boast of my own child, but to be sure, Jane—one does not often see anybody better looking. It is what everybody says," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 82). Mrs. Bennet only feigns to not like boasting of her daughter. Her vanity results in ridiculous conversation at the Netherfield Ball, as she speaks "freely, openly, and of nothing else" to Mrs. Lucas "but her expectation that Jane would soon be married to Mr. Bingley... Mrs. Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 194). And upon hearing of Jane's engagement at the end of the novel, Mrs. Bennet claims the credit: "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!" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 662). In Mrs. Bennet's experience, beauty ensures an advantageous marriage union.

Mrs. Bennet's vanity regarding her daughters' beauty blinds her to the possibility that an eligible man in possession of a good fortune may want more in a wife than just beauty; he may hope for an affectionate wife. Bingley thinks Jane is beautiful, but is at one point more greatly swayed by Darcy's opinion that Jane does not love him. (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 388, 706) Mrs. Bennet's effusions only strengthen Darcy's suspicions, as she vaunts of the fortune Jane will have. (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 194) Despite Bingley's attachment to Jane, he trusts in

Darcy's judgment more, both of "the certain evils of such a [marriage] choice," and of the "assurance...of [Jane's] indifference," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 388) and is not willing to enter a one-sided marriage relationship. Having such confidence in Jane's beauty propels Mrs. Bennet to openly speak of a marriage that has not yet been agreed upon. Mrs. Bennet's manners thwart her agenda in this instance, leading to a separation of Jane and Mr. Bingley. Austen instructs her readers in a lesson on boasting through Mrs. Bennet's failed business venture, as the vain behavior influences Darcy's intervention to prevent the engagement.

Mrs. Bennet's ambition blinds her to the dangers of relying solely on beauty, even in her own marriage. While initially under the "appearance of good humor" in their marriage, during the later years of marriage, Mr. Bennet intentionally spends most of his time in his library, away from the women of the house, and specifically away from Mrs. Bennet, "whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in the marriage put an end to all real affection for her," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 458). Mrs. Bennet's beauty alone cannot sustain the good humor with which her marriage began. Mr. Bennet was "so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 6). The dynamic between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet stems from early mutual disappointment in their marriage.

Mr. Bennet expects folly from people, and is generally content to laugh at others, including his wife, without having to share his amusement with anyone. He therefore anticipates amusing situations, and deliberately establishes circumstances to allow for Mrs. Bennet's foolishness. For example, he had always intended to visit Mr. Bingley, "though to the last always

assuring his wife that he should not go,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 8). He views the women in his home as creators of “folly and conceit,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 140), and while he enjoys the amusements which result from frivolity, at home he prefers to be free of them. His attempts at teasing result in Mrs. Bennet’s raptures, which then fatigue Mr. Bennet, and require his escape to the library (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 12). Mrs. Bennet feels the isolation created by her husband, and carries the weight of her daughters’ future financial fates alone, as well as her own. Mrs. Bennet relied on beauty alone to obtain Mr. Bennet as her “rightful property,” but neither Bennet spouse works to maintain the relationship after marriage.

Austen hints at the same dynamic repeating itself in Lydia’s marriage to Wickham. Lydia’s “good-humoured countenance” and desire for marriage makes her “a favourite with her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 84). She had “high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 84). These attributes, combined with the attention of the officers, “had increased into assurance,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 84), which mirrors the vanity exhibited by Mrs. Bennet. Both Lydia and Mrs. Bennet admire the officers, and both see their own feelings and desires as central in any situation.

Ironically, as similar as Lydia is to Mrs. Bennet, she is also, of all the sisters, most like the beloved Elizabeth in self-confidence, love of laughter, energy, and perceptiveness (Bennett 138, Wiltshire 7). Bennett asserts that like Elizabeth, Lydia is a natural leader, and, “like Elizabeth—indeed, more than Elizabeth—she knows her own mind and knows what she wants out of life: the status that being a married woman brings,” (Bennett 138). In this particular desire, Lydia mirrors Mrs. Bennet’s greatest desire. Lydia also “replicates the narcissism and

thoughtlessness of her mother,” (Wiltshire 6), behavior which Mrs. Bennet appreciates, as she lives vicariously through Lydia’s emotions. Lydia boasts to her sisters, “how I should like to be married before any of you; and then I would chaperon you about to all the balls,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 428). Lydia views marriage as a prize, an accomplishment in society, especially if she can attain it before her older sisters and flaunt her earlier success over them. Mrs. Bennet hopes to be the first to have a daughter married, partially for the same reason as Lydia--she can then flaunt her success over her neighbors. Mrs. Bennet and Lydia share the common goal of marriage, which, despite Lydia’s similarities to Elizabeth, illuminates Mrs. Bennet’s partiality toward her youngest daughter. As stubborn as Elizabeth is at refusing Mr. Collins’s proposal, Lydia is willing to flirt with any officer to gain attention.

Lydia’s desire for married status compels her reckless, flirtatious behavior. Lydia’s “wild volatility” and “emptiness of...mind” fixed her character to “be the most determined flirt that ever made herself or her family ridiculous,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 448), just as Elizabeth had predicted to her father. “Lydia wanted only encouragement to attach herself to anybody,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 536), a poor foundation for a marriage relationship. Though the scandal surrounding Lydia and Wickham eventually results in marriage, a fact over which both Lydia and Mrs. Bennet exult, it’s a marriage which mirrors Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s, as Wickham’s “affection for her soon sunk into indifference,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 738). As Wickham and Mr. Bennet share in reduced affection for their wives, both Lydia and Mrs. Bennet enjoy an increase in social standing, despite their manners. Austen perpetuates Mrs. Bennet’s foolish vanity by continuing the same unsatisfying marital dynamics in the following generation: a young and beautiful wife does not guarantee perfect marital happiness.

Mr. Bennet expected to have a son when he first married, and therefore in his mind, “economy was held to be perfectly useless,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 588). Additionally, Mrs. Bennet has “no turn for economy,” indicating her mismanagement of household expenses such as servants, meals, and shopping, (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 588-9). Mrs. Bennet spends money to either indulge a favorite daughter or to impress a potential suitor. She frequently passes additional money to Lydia (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 590), and always plans to have two courses for dinner when entertaining Mr. Bingley, (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 14, 234, 642). Despite Mrs. Bennet’s extravagance, the Bennet estate provides well for the family while Mr. Bennet lives. However, because he has no male heirs, the estate passes on to the next oldest male relative when Mr. Bennet dies, leaving no inheritance for his children. An income of two thousand pounds a year allows for a comfortable living (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 5), and Mrs. Bennet’s inheritance of four thousand pounds was “ample for her situation in life,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 52). Shapard notes that a mother in *Sense and Sensibility* “is able to support herself and three daughters in reasonable comfort in a nice home she has rented, with a staff of three servants, on five hundred a year,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 5). This comparison reveals the wealth associated with the Bennet family, and the even greater wealth attributed to Mr. Bingley’s “four or five thousand a year,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 4) and Mr. Darcy’s ten thousand a year, a sum which Shapard notes “places Mr. Darcy among the one or two hundred wealthiest men in England then,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 17). Despite her lack of skill in household expenses, Mrs. Bennet is particularly aware of the financial advantages available through marriage to specific eligible bachelors.

Mrs. Bennet's knowledge of the income associated with single men is indicative of the common gossip of the time, but her public commentary concerning potential wealth is unique to her vanity. Before ever meeting Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet remarks, "If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield...and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 14). Mrs. Bennet's wish is a lofty one, and foreshadows her focus on wealthy connections. Having "no turn for economy," (50) Mrs. Bennet is delighted with wealth. While enumerating the advantages of Jane's potential engagement to Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet boasts of "his being such a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them," as well as the advantage of Jane's younger sisters meeting "other rich men" because of Jane's "marrying so greatly," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 194). Upon hearing of Elizabeth's engagement to Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Bennet exclaims, "how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it—nothing at all," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 720). Her elation continues, "I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more!" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 722). Mrs. Bennet's single mindedness on money is also exemplified in her focus on clothes. She leaps from despair to joy over thoughts of clothing. For example, immediately after complaining to her sister of Mr. Collins's engagement to Charlotte Lucas, Mrs. Bennet expresses the "greatest of comforts" at the Mrs. Gardiner's fashion news concerning "long sleeves," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 270). In another example, Mrs. Bennet's flutterings and spasms during Lydia's disappearance with Wickham dissolve into exclamations of pride and wonder at her youngest daughter's marriage, and her immediate concern turns to Lydia's wedding clothes and how much Mr. Bennet would



pay for them. Tangible evidence of wealth brings Mrs. Bennet happiness and security. She naturally would want to secure the future of the Longbourn Estate for her own interests.

To mitigate the effects of the entailment of her home, Mrs. Bennet conspires with Mr. Collins regarding marriage to one of her daughters. Mrs. Bennet dictates a suitable marriage alliance based on Elizabeth's beauty and Mr. Collins's adequate income, specifically concerning Longbourn's entailment. Mrs. Bennet's vanity blinds her to Elizabeth's disdain for Mr. Collins, expecting Elizabeth will submit to Mr. Collins's proposal, either out of excitement to marry or out of filial obligation to her family. After learning of Elizabeth's refusal to Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet's conduct lacks all good graces. Siding with Mr. Collins, she rejects Elizabeth's refusal of marriage. She solicits Mr. Bennet, Jane, and Charlotte Lucas to persuade Elizabeth to accept the proposal, to no avail. Desperate for a union which will secure her future home, Mrs. Bennet threatens to never speak to Elizabeth again, insults her ability to receive a second marriage proposal, "coaxe[s] and threaten[s] [Elizabeth] by turns" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 218), and proclaims her an "undutiful" child (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 220). Notably, Mrs. Bennet warns Elizabeth, "I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 220). While a realistic warning for the time, Mrs. Bennet's intent can only be to coerce Elizabeth. Her mind is set on her business and she is thwarted by Elizabeth's refusal.

Additionally, Mrs. Bennet's vanity assumes Mr. Bennet's compliance in censuring Elizabeth for her refusal. Mr. Bennet, an admirer of Elizabeth's clever mind and independent will, found Mr. Collins "as absurd as he had hoped," and upon first meeting his cousin, "listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most resolute composure of countenance, and, except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his

pleasure,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 132). Mr. Bennet’s determination that his favorite daughter not align herself with a fool such as Mr. Collins is exemplified in his stance against the express wishes of his wife. “An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 216). In this manner, Mr. Bennet gives Elizabeth not so much permission to disobey her mother, but solidarity in her decision. Clearly, he does not share Mrs. Bennet’s alarm that this is her only chance at marriage and financial security.

Despite Mr. Bennet’s unwillingness, Mrs. Bennet continues to harass Elizabeth regarding her decision. Elizabeth’s disobedience and Mr. Bennet’s lack of support offend Mrs. Bennet’s vanity. She is so consumed with her business to marry her daughters, that she disregards not only her daughter’s express wishes, but also her husband’s verdict. Without Mr. Bennet’s refusal to counteract her, Mrs. Bennet would go from a ridiculous fool to a tyrannical fool, inexorable in her matchmaking attempts. As Mrs. Bennet effuses lamentations concerning Elizabeth’s refusal and the resulting financial ruin their family faces, she is quite unaware that Charlotte Lucas, plainer in beauty but more welcoming to Mr. Collins as a suitor, has accepted his proposal within three days (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 244) after Elizabeth rejected it.

Austen reinforces Mrs. Bennet’s ridiculousness through Lady Lucas’s antics. Both women laud success over the other, and feign support for the other, when socially necessary. Lady Lucas and Mrs. Bennet share a desire for advantageous marriages for their daughters. Upon Charlotte’s engagement to Mr. Collins, Lady Lucas, “began directly to calculate, with more interest than the matter had ever excited before, how many years longer Mr. Bennet was likely to

live,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 238), and “not [being] insensible of triumph on being able to retort on Mrs. Bennet the comfort of having a daughter well married... she called at Longbourn rather oftener than usual to say how happy she was,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 248). Lady Lucas’s behavior, though vain, does not compare to Mrs. Bennet’s boasting or match-making endeavors—Mrs. Bennet remains the caricature of foolish vanity.

Mrs. Bennet’s foolish vanity takes on a hypocritical hue when offended. When Mr. Collins marries Charlotte Lucas rather one of the Bennet daughters, Mrs. Bennet complains, “The consequence of it is, that Lady Lucas will have a daughter married before I have, and that the Longbourn estate is just as much entailed as ever,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 270). Vanity laments the loss of bragging rights and illogically assigns blame for the existing entailment. Mrs. Bennet’s vanity then progresses to hypocrisy in declaring, “The Lucases are very artful people indeed, sister. They are all for what they can get,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 270). Rather than admitting her own artifice<sup>4</sup> in marital efforts, Mrs. Bennet assigns the vice to honest, humble people. Her final complaint marks the highlight of her hypocrisy: “It makes me very nervous and poorly, to be thwarted so in my own family, and to have neighbours who think of themselves before anybody else,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 270). Ironically, Mrs. Bennet is accountable for both thwarting Elizabeth and aggressively competing with her neighbors. By assigning her follies to other people instead of recognizing them herself, Mrs. Bennet continues to see her emotions and worries as justifiably nerve-inducing.

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<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Bennet’s artifice is seen in sending Jane to Netherfield Park on horseback in the rain, hoping her daughter falls ill and has to rely on Mr. Bingley’s hospitality. She furthermore designs Elizabeth’s acceptance of Mr. Collins’s proposal.

Mrs. Bennet's vanity often dictates extreme reactions on her part, as previously demonstrated by her relentless behavior toward Elizabeth's refusal of marriage. In one of the few essays dedicated to Mrs. Bennet's character, Wiltshire describes her as possessing a "demonstrably 'uncertain temper,' her fluctuations of mood have no fulcrum, no internal resting place," (184). Mrs. Bennet's extreme emotional moods exhaust those around her (including readers), excuse her from responsibility, and maintain her person as the central focus. The extremity of Mrs. Bennet's moods is most visible during Lydia's disappearance. Vanity insists on Mrs. Bennet as the sole victim in the scenario. Despite the poor reputation which the Bennet daughters would suffer from Lydia's behavior, Mrs. Bennet is more concerned with her unlikely removal from their home per the Collins's entailment. Mrs. Bennet focuses on her own emotions: "I am frightened out of my wits; and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me, such spasms in my side, and pains in my head, and such beatings at my heart, that I can get no rest by night or by day," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 554). Of these symptoms, Shapard notes that "the tendency, seen so vividly in Mrs. Bennet, to gripe about ailments or to fancy oneself ill, often as a way to elicit attention or sympathy, is a frequent target of Jane Austen's satire," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 555). Two weeks after her despondent tremblings, Mrs. Bennet, still in her dressing room, receives news that Lydia is to be married and is overjoyed. Her emotional state "was now in an irritation as violent from delight as she had ever been fidgety from alarm and vexation" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 584). Mrs. Bennet's intense emotional reactions and fluctuations prevent her from realizing anyone's feelings but her own. Furthermore, her intensity requires others' attention to remain focused on her.

In the midst of her flutterings and vexation, Mrs. Bennet cannot accept responsibility for her indulgence of Lydia's flirtations. Instead she blames "every body but the person to whose ill judging indulgence the errors of her daughter must be principally owing" (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 552). Mrs. Bennet attributes blame to Wickham, the Forsters, and Mr. Bennet in Lydia's scandalous circumstances, but does not see either Lydia's or her own role in the scenario. The happy outcome of Lydia and Wickham's scandal absolved Mrs. Bennet of any potential wrongdoing: "She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, not humbled by any remembrance of her misconduct," (584). Heedless of her own responsibility in encouraging Lydia's flirtatious behavior and romantic fantasies, Mrs. Bennet does not face her own faults. Mrs. Bennet's vanity refuses to own responsibility for encouraging and allowing Lydia's escapade in the first place.

The summation of Mrs. Bennet's energies and efforts regarding her daughters' marriages is in essence the definition of vanity: "that which is vain, futile, or worthless; that which is of no value or profit," (vanity OED). Rather than achieving her desired outcome, Mrs. Bennet's behavior actually prevents marriage unions: her vaunting tainted Bingley's view of Jane, her inconsideration of Elizabeth's feelings drove Mr. Collins to the Lucas home, and her indulgence toward Lydia created scandalous circumstances. The marriages of her daughters take place in large part because of Mr. Darcy's, not Mrs. Bennet's, actions. In Mr. Darcy, Austen creates a character who is initially proud and ridiculous, but does reform, after considering Elizabeth's response to his marriage proposal. In contrast, Mrs. Bennet, who is censured by Elizabeth throughout the novel, never heeds Elizabeth's logic or warnings, and continues in her foolish fashion, to devastate the potential marriage unions of her daughters.

Austen establishes Mrs. Bennet as a comically oppressive character, absurd and foolish in her intent on marrying her daughters off to wealthy men. Much of her vanity and hypocrisy is revealed in behavior that is ridiculous and at times embarrassing. Her efforts toward marriage unions result in embarrassment and scandal. As none of Mrs. Bennet's daughters marry in consequence of her efforts, Austen demonstrates the ridiculousness of her interference. In modeling Mrs. Bennet's foolish efforts with no positive outcome, Austen reiterates Wollstonecraft's mantra to use humor as a guide to teach against romantic sentiment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AUSTEN'S APT COMPARISONS IN CONCLUSIONS

Comedy in literature generally indicates happy endings, and in Austen's novels, results in felicitous marriages. However, within her happy conclusions, Austen delivers a final moral lesson for readers by creating realistic situations which reflect characters' appropriate behaviors. While some characters reform and are rewarded with happy endings, other characters persist in impropriety. Their endings follow "the logical outcome of the temperament as well as values, of the characters themselves," (Brown 1584). Austen dispenses conclusions based on these logical outcomes, creating a sense of reality to her fiction, and imparting culminating precepts for her readers. The final circumstance of Austen's characters imparts lessons to readers, and "convey[s] the relevant moral values insofar as they embody a vision of life and reality," (Brown 1582).

Consequently, Harriet Smith marries Robert Martin, a suitably advantageous connection for her sweet personality, while Mr. Elton, whose goal in marriage was financial and social status, marries Augusta Hawkins, a lady so "easily impressed" and "so very ready to have him," that he caught both "substance and shadow--both fortune and affection," (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 320). Essentially, the characters' behaviors, and overall reform in unwanted behaviors, determine their final outcome, or level of happiness. Readers anticipate Harriet's happiness, surrounded by sisters, mother-in-law, and husband in her new family dynamics. Readers likewise anticipate Mr. Elton's satisfaction with the social and financial advantage through his wife's status, but at the cost of enduring Mrs. Elton's snobbery. Overall, Austen's

characters get what they want, but the degree of their just reward reveals Austen's willingness to encourage misconduct.

To closer examine these degrees of just reward, I look at three characters who share the same vice, but exhibit the trait differently. Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Norris, and Emma Woodhouse all display a specific trait: interference without sympathetic identification. This characteristic is noted in Mrs. Bennet's efforts to marry her daughters to rich gentleman; in Mrs. Norris's control over the Bertram household, specifically over Fanny; and in Emma Woodhouse's sympathetic failings. Each of these characters is contrasted with a counterpart, or character, who models sympathetic identification. The contrast between the two is necessary for two reasons: the potential for each character's sympathetic development, and the imparted lesson to readers.

Sympathetic identity is central to the eighteenth-century idea of happiness. Austen-Bolt writes that "eighteenth-century thinkers considered sympathetic identification to be a morally just act, one conducive to fostering happiness," (Austen-Bolt 272). Concerning sympathetic identity, Adam Smith writes, "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers," (9). Our own ease and senses disconnect us from another's experiences, relieving us of a social responsibility toward those in need. Smith maintains that "it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [another's] sensations.... By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation," (9). Imagination, then, allows our senses to feel a perceived emotion, one constructed by our own impressions, and one that alleviates disconnect between human experiences. As a



fiction writer, Austen relies on imagination to “mend the world” as far as she is able. Her invented characters, settings, and plots convey situations in which readers can envision and immerse themselves. Identifying with Austen’s characters, and with their comic conclusions, allows readers to perceive foolish behaviors and just rewards.

Mrs. Bennet’s just reward is comically complex. She gets what she most wants--her daughters married, but she remains a fool even after achieving her greatest desire. The novel ends with three of her five daughters married, and the remaining daughters likely to marry<sup>5</sup>. However, the Bennet daughters married, not because of their mother’s efforts, but in spite of them. It was Mr. Darcy’s endeavors that rejoined Bingley and Jane, that saved Lydia from ruination, and that subdued his own pride enough to approach Elizabeth with a second, humbler proposal. Austen offers Mrs. Bennet as the vain, ridiculous character, and Mr. Darcy as the example of reform.

Mr. Darcy benefits from sympathetic identification, specifically in regard to Elizabeth. After a prideful first proposal, Mr. Darcy examines Elizabeth’s refusal and works to correct his initial self-centered judgments. Additionally, his sympathetic identification with Georgiana’s heartache over Wickham spurs his efforts to save Lydia from the same potential demise. Naturally, his connection to Elizabeth also encourages this effort. Additionally, Darcy repents of his judgments regarding Jane and Bingley. Austen models reform through Darcy’s initial pride and subsequent humility. By seeing himself through Elizabeth’s eyes, Darcy realizes

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<sup>5</sup> Austen, who frequently continued her characters’ stories after the novel’s publication, shares the after-story with family members, concluding that “Kitty Bennet was satisfactorily married to a clergyman near Pemberley, while Mary obtained nothing higher than one of her uncle Philip’s clerks, and was content to be considered a star in the society of Meryton,” (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 737).

his mistakes and works to correct them. Mr. Darcy's reform rewards him with a happy marriage to Elizabeth at novel's end.

While Darcy's relationships benefit from his sympathetic identification, Mrs. Bennet's relationships suffer from her inability to identify with others--with her neighbors who want their own daughters to find secure marriages, with her daughters who have their own opinions about marriage partners, and with her husband who seeks respite from her. Mrs. Bennet is left at home with only Mr. Bennet for company, who continues to spend most of his time in the library, and with Mary, the most socially awkward of all the Bennet daughters. Even Jane and Mr. Bingley choose to leave Netherfield after a year, as being "so near a vicinity to her mother and Meryton relations was not desirable even to *his* easy temper, or *her* affectionate heart," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 734). Austen remarks that Mr. Bennet misses Elizabeth a great deal, and enjoys visiting her unannounced, but there is no mention that Mrs. Bennet misses any of her daughters. All in all, Mrs. Bennet is left with a reclusive daughter, an inattentive husband, and with neighbors to whom she can no longer boast of marriages (saving Kitty's assumed future union). Of Mrs. Bennet's ending, Austen remarks, "I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life; ... she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly," (Austen, *Annotated Pride* 734). Mrs. Bennet maintains her nervous and silly tendencies, and doesn't seem to mind her family's migration away from her company. Perhaps she is a foolish enough character that she simply does not see her isolation.

While Mrs. Bennet's lack of sympathy is presented as ridiculous and entertaining, Mrs. Norris's lack of sympathy takes on a more sinister aspect, as a "malignant fool, playing the role of wicked stepmother in relation to Fanny" (Lauber 519). The degree of just reward attributed to Mrs. Norris correlates with the degree of severity in her unsympathetic behavior toward her niece. Mrs. Norris's harsh treatment toward Fanny traces back to her derision of Fanny's mother.

Despite similarities between Mrs. Norris and her youngest sister, Mrs. Norris elevates her own situation by diminishing another's. Mrs. Norris's marriage, six years after a younger sister's, was to a man "with scarcely any private fortune," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 4) and was financially secured through her brother-in-law's connections. As the eldest sister, Mrs. Norris likely felt slighted at marrying so much later and so much poorer than her sister did, as marriage secured a social standing for women in this time. Having finally married, she now feels justified in reprimanding her youngest sister's marriage choice. Mrs. Norris "points out the folly of her [sister's] conduct, and threaten[s] her with all its possible ill consequences" (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 8). Despite needing financial assistance from her brother-in-law upon her marriage, Mrs. Norris does not sympathetically identify with her younger sister, who is in a similar circumstance. It is, perhaps, Mrs. Norris's personal understanding of her sister's circumstances which highlights her sinister side. Her immediate experience *does* give her an idea of her sister's plight, and her senses *do* inform her of the suffering. Mrs. Norris needs no imagination to understand a poorly situated marriage, yet instead of sympathizing, she severs the relationship completely, and influences Lord Bertram to do the same.

In addition to not sympathizing with her sister's similar circumstances, Mrs. Norris seems to expect a display of humility before reconciliation is possible. Only after Mrs. Price demonstrates "contrition and despondence" (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 10) does Mrs. Norris feel inclined to offer, not her own help, but that of Sir Thomas. Mrs. Norris claims she could not "bear to see her [sister's child] want while I had a bit of bread to give her," indicating she did have the capacity to sympathize with someone less fortunate, and that she would no longer "withhold [her] mite," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 12). The bit of bread Mrs. Norris hopes to give to Fanny is access to Lord Bertram's generosity. As the sponsor for Fanny's good fortune in coming to Mansfield Park, one would anticipate, as did Lord and Lady Bertram, that Mrs. Norris favors and nurtures the young girl. Instead, Mrs. Norris, though possessing plenty, literally contributes a single mite--her edict to bring Fanny to Mansfield Park--while volunteering Lord Bertram's home and resources to raise her. Though claiming to give both bread and mite, Mrs. Norris firmly rejects the idea of caring for Fanny at the parsonage, first out of respect for her husband's health, and after his death, out of lack of space in her home. In a single action, Mrs. Norris exemplifies lack of sympathy for a needy sister and child, and for the benefactors which she herself volunteered.

Mrs. Norris's actions appear hypocritical and self-centered, but may root themselves in self-preservation. Laura Fairchild Brodie defends Mrs. Norris' directing tactics as an attempt to resist the marginalization of superfluous females. Unmarried women at this time existed on the fringes of society. Their financial security and social status rests with male relatives. Mrs. Norris's financial security was dependent on Lord Bertram's generosity at the time of her marriage, and more so after her husband's death. By influencing Lord Bertram's decisions

regarding finances and children, Mrs. Norris hopes to make herself relevant in his home. Mrs. Norris's assured future "rests in the removal of Sir Thomas; his absence facilitates Mrs. Norris presence (Brodie 707). Mrs. Norris inserts herself as a needed support to Lady Bertram while Sir Thomas is away, often delegating Fanny as a needed companion for Lady Bertram. Assuming Sir Thomas's authoritative role in his absence assures Mrs. Norris of her importance to the Bertrams. However, in contrast to Sir Thomas's kind intentions toward Fanny, Mrs. Norris's intentions are self-serving: her sympathies rest only with herself and her relevance to Lord Bertram.

Mrs. Norris does not generally accommodate suggestions, insisting on her view as the best one. However, when a request suits her own purposes as well, she makes exceptions. For instance, Lord Bertram's early request for a distinction of "rank, fortune, rights, and expectations" between Fanny and his own daughters settled in Mrs. Norris' mind the "right line of conduct" (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 24) to take with Fanny. By heeding Sir Thomas's request, Mrs. Norris justifies her ill treatment toward Fanny. Condemning Fanny to tedious labor, limiting her activities, and restricting her comforts all give Mrs. Norris a sense of control and superiority, a sense of relevance in the Bertram family. Mrs. Norris directs the placement of Fanny's room, and which maid dresses her, allowing Fanny the least comfort, space, and attention of everyone in the home. "Mrs. Norris, having stipulated for there never being a fire in it on Fanny's account, was tolerably resigned to her having the use of what nobody else wanted," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 284). She directs Fanny's outings and her activities at Mansfield, limiting Fanny's opportunities. That "Mrs. Norris had no affection for Fanny, and no wish of procuring her pleasure at any time" (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 152) is evident in Mrs. Norris's language and actions.

In her relationship with Fanny, Mrs. Norris fails once again to extend sympathy in a known predicament. Mrs. Norris's fear of irrelevance should extend to understanding Fanny's insecurity in the Bertram household. Yet Mrs. Norris refuses to acknowledge the similar circumstances, and instead, alienates and subjugates Fanny. Fanny keenly feels Mrs. Norris's abuse, and having "never received kindness from her Aunt Norris, [she] could not love her," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 50). Recognizing her inferior station, Fanny did, however, submit to Mrs. Norris's mistreatment without complaint.

Fanny's inferiority, which compels her to submit to Mrs. Norris, also compels her to be somewhat frightened of Lord Bertram. His rank, power, and "grave looks" awe Fanny, (Austen *Annotated Mansfield* 30). Despite his intimidation, Lord Bertram plays the sympathetic counterpart to Mrs. Norris's mistreatment of Fanny. While Sir Thomas does not view Fanny as his own child, he willingly provides physically for Fanny. During her childhood, Sir Thomas interacted very little with Fanny, as all his future hopes for daughters of which he could be proud rested on his own two girls, Maria and Julia. As Fanny matures, and especially as Henry Crawford notices Fanny, Sir Thomas realizes the gracious young woman she's become. He rectifies Mrs. Norris's order of no fires in Fanny's rooms, and steps in to divert his sister-in-law's reproaches toward Fanny (Austen, *Mansfield*, 580). Mrs. Norris does not perceive the diversion, unaware "to what degree he thought well of his niece, or how very far he was from wishing to have his own children's merits set off by the depreciation of hers," (Austen, *Mansfield*, 580). Sir Thomas's and Mrs. Norris's perceptions of Fanny contrast substantially, as do their actions toward her.

Sir Thomas, as the rightful authority and sponsor for Fanny, orchestrates her return to Portsmouth (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 664). While it may appear tyrannical and

manipulative on his part to condemn Fanny to poverty after living so well at Mansfield, Sir Thomas's intentions were genuine: "He certainly wished her to go willingly, but he as certainly wished her to be heartily sick of home before her visit ended; and that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 660). Sir Thomas's manipulation toward Fanny had her best interest in mind, whereas Mrs. Norris's manipulations of Fanny were strictly self-serving. In juxtaposing the two types of manipulations, Austen focuses on the necessity of sympathy in relationships.

While Sir Thomas's sympathy was misdirected, its sincerity merits reward, as noted by Austen's narration: "His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by [Fanny], deserved it, (Austen *Annotated Mansfield* 848). Fanny feels deeply grateful for Sir Thomas's generosity toward herself and her brother. As intimidated as Fanny initially feels toward Sir Thomas, she always conveys gratitude for his kindnesses towards her, and works to fulfill a filial obligation, though she is only his niece. Fanny, in her person, morals, and conduct, is Sir Thomas's rich repayment. In her, he acquires "the daughter that he wanted," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 848). Similarly, Sir Thomas feels pride in Edmund, his younger son, who was "useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 830). Furthermore, though Sir Thomas initially trusted Mrs. Norris with his children's upbringing, he began to note in "their daily intercourse, in business, or in chat," that he had previously "considerably overrated her sense," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 836). Mrs. Norris's removal from Mansfield "was the great supplementary comfort of Sir Thomas's life," having "felt her as an hourly evil," (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 836).

Mrs. Norris's evil-doing toward Fanny is ironically rewarded at the end of the novel as she and Maria are relegated to endure each other's personalities in a remote location, far from Mansfield Park. Mrs. Norris's ending is quite sensible--a socially ruined daughter is comfortably provided for and governed by her widowed aunt. However, for Mrs. Norris, this ending subverts her attempts of relevance at Mansfield. Instead she attempts to maintain relevance in a remote household by overseeing "her unfortunate Maria" (Austen, *Annotated Mansfield* 836), a position which still enables her to manage people, though not a person as good and submissive as Fanny.

Austen creates Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Bennet as two different examples of unreformed characters. Readers laugh at Mrs. Bennet's ridiculous antics and perhaps even feel for those who have to endure her nerves. However, readers abhor Mrs. Norris's abuse and tyranny regarding Fanny. Both women manipulate those around them, but Mrs. Norris's manipulation has more intent to its severity. The resulting rewards for each woman align with their actions and further Austen's lesson regarding sympathetic identity. In *Emma* Woodhouse, Jane Austen gives readers a more complex character than Mrs. Bennet or Mrs. Norris, in that Emma begins to reform; she recognizes her responsibility to identifying with those around her. Therefore, the ending of *Emma* is more complex in regards to Emma's rewards. Before discussing Emma's reform, it's necessary to first look at her ability.

Emma's character is capable of sympathetic identification, and demonstrates this tendency in regards to her father. However, she lacks mature sympathy in regards to other characters. At the beginning of the novel and at the young age of 21, Emma already demonstrates a great deal of sympathy for her aging father. Emma knows the conversation topics which will soothe her father, and which conversations to avoid. She abides by his traveling conditions, and plays backgammon with him nightly (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 10). These efforts require



management and finesse. Emma finds help in these tasks from both Mrs. Weston and Mr. George Knightley. Emma worries about her father as her sole companion, “for having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in ways than in years,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 6), and she determines to never marry so she can take care of him. Some may interpret Emma’s decision as self-preservation. Emma certainly could be maintaining her own mental well-being or could simply be brave in the face of an unchangeable circumstance. Ensuring Mr. Woodhouse’s comfort may be in Emma’s best interest, for he is likely easier to care for when he’s content rather than when he’s upset. However, I view Emma as a loyal daughter, one who naturally tires of the care her father requires, but one who willingly nurtures him.

Readers may view Mr. Woodhouse’s edicts as manipulative and foolish, similar to both Mrs. Norris’s and Mrs. Bennet’s demands. However, I believe Austen presents Mr. Woodhouse as an exception to this pattern. Mr. Woodhouse is undoubtedly fussy: he enjoys company, but only in good weather and at what he deems appropriate times; he enjoys food, but only that which he considers healthy; and he enjoys conversation, but only when everyone agrees with his opinion. Essentially, he pesters those around him to agree with his judgments. His conversation topics are limited and often repeated, to the annoyance sometimes of Mr. John Knightley.

In light of Mr. Woodhouse’s particularities, Margaret Morganroth Gullette suggests that he has signs of dementia, a condition which places him in a position deserving compassion (91). Despite Mr. Woodhouse's many flaws and irritating behaviors, no one belittles or mocks him, save an occasional irritating exclamation from Mr. John Knightley. “The most plausible

reason,” explains Gullette, “why Mr. Woodhouse cannot be satirized that squares with Austen's linguistic and moral values is because he is cognitively unable to reform,” (94). Because Austen encourages and rewards reform, Emma’s treatment of her father, who is incapable of reform, serves as a model for sympathetic identity in such situations. Emma’s skill in handling her father’s eccentricities and her willingness to meet his needs demonstrates a person capable of sympathy.

In contrast to the sympathy Emma shows her father, Emma’s sympathy toward Miss Bates is in short supply. One obvious explanation, discussed previously in chapter two, is Miss Bates’s propensity for unnecessary and unending monologuing. Another factor is Emma’s dislike for Miss Bates’s niece, Jane Fairfax. Emma’s dislike for Jane fosters her dislike of Miss Bates simply by association. Ironically, Jane and Emma, women of similar age, could have shared a genuine friendship. Jane certainly would have welcomed the association. However, Emma’s vanity prevents this friendship from developing, as Jane is accomplished in everything to which Emma has refused to apply herself. Jane’s ability at the pianoforte and in singing outshine Emma’s talents. Emma resents the potential comparison of herself to Jane, and dreads listening to Miss Bates’s letters from Jane. As she tells Harriet, “One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every letter from her is read forty times over; her compliments to all friends go round and round again; and if she does but send her aunt the pattern of a stomacher, or knit a pair of garters for her grandmother, one hears of nothing else for a month. I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death,” (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 150-152). Emma’s complaint regarding the popularity of Jane within her only family relations exposes a tendency in Emma to withhold sympathy in some circumstances. In her complaint of Jane Fairfax, Emma refuses to see the

circumstances which demand sympathy. Jane has lost her parents and her future security. She has only Mrs. and Miss Bates to claim as family. Instead of offering sympathy, Emma focuses only on the potential comparison inevitable between herself and Jane, a comparison in which Emma would surely fall short.

Emma's interactions with Jane maintain politeness, but her interactions with Miss Bates hint at impatience. Emma generally conducts herself appropriately, especially in society. Emma's public insult of Miss Bates at Box Hill, discussed previously in chapter one, is uncharacteristic, an impulsive act that she does not consider offensive until Mr. Knightley censures her regarding it. Mr. Knightley is the clear counterpart to Emma's lack of sympathy. He identifies the parallels between the two women and the connection they have shared since Emma's childhood. Mr. Knightley's sympathy for Miss Bates and her situation requires him to educate Emma regarding her error. From Mr. Knightley's scolding, Emma realizes her self-serving and hypocritical blunder toward Miss Bates, and the similarities between their circumstances.

Like Emma, Miss Bates is the main caretaker of an aging parent. The two women likely understand the other's situation quite well. Also, Miss Bates has known Emma from an infant, and was once her social superior. The two women and their families are familiar with each other. These factors indicate a mutually respectful acquaintance. Emma's general treatment toward Miss Bates could be more in line with her treatment toward her father. She realizes what shame she would feel were someone to censure her, "How could you be so unfeeling to your father?" (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 670). In recognizing her feelings regarding potential mistreatment of her father, Emma recognizes the lack of sympathy she has shown to Miss Bates.

Emma's discrepancy in sympathetic identity reveals itself through her social interactions. At the beginning of Emma's story, she has very little to actually do or improve upon, having been continually indulged by both her father and her governess/friend. Believing herself to be sufficiently skilled and socially superior, Emma resorts to matchmaking to entertain herself. Emma's vanity leads her into repeated and significant blunders throughout the novel. Having ignored a potentially genuine friendship with Jane Fairfax, Emma furthers the injury by conjuring a potential affair between Jane and Mr. Dixon, and shares her suspicions with Frank Churchill. Emma's imagination regarding Frank convinces her of their mutual suitability to each other as marriage partners before she ever meets him. She admits to Mr. Knightley that her "vanity was flattered" (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 760) and she allowed Frank's attentions. One of Emma's greatest blunders was in her attempts to socially elevate the illegitimate Harriet Smith.

Emma's reform begins when she recognizes her blunders, and matures as she self-reflects regarding her personal responsibility toward people surrounding her. Almost as soon as she shared her gossip regarding Jane and Mr. Dixon, Emma realizes her fault. Other blunders, such as misreading Mr. Elton's attentions, take more time for Emma to see. And her blunder regarding Miss Bates has to be pointed out to her by Mr. Knightley. After Mr. Knightley's censure, Emma recognizes that "she had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be so no more," (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 670). Emma's self-assessment leads her to act more sympathetically toward both Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax.

Emma's reform rewards her with a "perfect happiness of the union" with Mr. Knightley. (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 862). However, *Emma's* conclusion, while resulting in marriage, is somewhat tarnished. Since Emma's reform is just beginning, Austen leaves her with additional practice, so to speak. Emma's social circle remains almost identical to the beginning of her story. Readers know that Jane marries and moves away, that Harriet marries and as "the intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill," (Austen, *Annotated Emma* 858). Emma is left in Highbury with a new husband, her aging father, occasional visits from her sister, and Mrs. Weston nearby, individuals with which she easily identifies. Miss Bates, Mrs. Elton, and Mrs. Cole complete Emma's social circle, and also create the practice opportunities for sympathetic identity. Additionally, Emma's greatest challenge will continue to be boredom, and I anticipate that she will lapse into occasional attempts at match-making, despite her recent reform.

The reform Austen brought about in Emma's character was in her sense of responsibility and position in society. Even during that reform, Mr. Knightley's sharp censure was not intended to deride Emma's misstep, but to correct her. Austen leaves the sympathetically developing Emma in a realistic ending, one surrounded by ordinary and sometimes irritating individuals--individuals with whom interaction actually fosters sympathetic identity. By the end of her story as far as the novel reveals it, Emma has just begun her journey of sympathetic identification. Austen has set the scene for Emma to continue identifying with Miss Bates, caring for her father, and nurturing her marriage. By creating a realistic ending, Austen shows confidence in Emma's capacity--and in her readers' capacities--to sympathize with others.

Austen's conclusions for the three women discussed in this chapter, Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Norris, and Emma Woodhouse, impart a moral lesson regarding sympathy for others. The

individual conclusion for each character imparts a moral lesson specific to that novel and character: Mrs. Bennet's foolishness remains her constant companion by novel's end, despite the success of her daughters' marriages; Mrs. Norris's selfish meddling ostracizes her from family and society; and Emma Woodhouse's reform in sympathetic identity rewards her with her beloved Mr. Knightley. When all three conclusions are examined in relation to the others, however, a moral summation can be concluded: the degree of sympathetic identity which each character achieves determines the happiness of the circumstances at novel's end.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

As a novelist, Jane Austen mends the world as best as she is able, through her satire of human follies. In laughing at her characters, affectionately and mockingly, Austen invites readers to laugh with her at people's ridiculousness. We laugh at innocent youthful foolishness, believing sensibility and wisdom will follow. We laugh at overt ridiculousness, learning to avoid the same behavior in ourselves. We learn to laugh at our own blunders, and resolve to not repeat them. Austen's humor continues to entertain and educate today, and is relevant to the public and private domains in which we exist today.

Today Austen's readers face numerous opportunities for public ridicule and boasting through social media. Lessons from Mrs. Bennet's overt displays of vaunting remind readers of the foolish reception of her antics, while Emma's public insult of Miss Bates demonstrates the harm created by circulated slander. Savvy social media publicists today benefit from Austen's moral lessons regarding exposed satire. Limiting political and social ridicule to private conversations, such as Emma's confiding remarks to Harriet, expresses personal opinion and maintains polite interaction between the opposition.

Austen's judicious nature and turn for humor invites readers to examine the reflection in the glass and ask themselves thoughtful questions: "Does vanity drive me to ridiculous behavior in my attempts to meet my goals? Can I sympathize with someone in a similar situation as mine? With someone in a completely unfamiliar situation?" In today's political and social climate, a little bit of laughter could alleviate opposing tensions, allow for more common ground to develop, and foster understanding between differing opinions.

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