This Is Mrs. Bennet:

A Woman D. W. Harding Has Never Met

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The general impression of Austen's novels, which critic D. W. Harding says relieved him of any desire to read them, is that they offer readers a humorous refuge from an uncertain world. In his article "'Regulated Hatred': An Aspect in the Work of Jane Austen," Harding claims that this impression is misleading and that Jane Austen is actually very critical of her society, covertly expressing downright hatred for certain members of it by means of caricature. Mrs. Bennet, from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, is one of these "comic monster[s] ." Harding claims that in order to view Mrs. Bennet as anything other than utterly detested by Austen one must ignore Austen's summary of her at the end of Chapter One: "She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and an uncertain temper."[1] Actually, Austen's Mrs. Bennet is much more complex than Harding acknowledges. Austen's initial summary notwithstanding, *Pride and Prejudice* even looks at Mrs. Bennet forgivingly. Her behavior is often provoked by her environment: both her society and her family. Because she helps, or tries to help, her family, Mrs. Bennet's ludicrous actions can even be seen as lovable.

Mrs. Bennet's society and family condemn her to a series of conventional roles. Mrs. Bennet snags a husband by playing the role of the good-humored, pretty young

woman. Mr. Bennet also believes that good looks will make a good wife, and he marries her. However, once she and Mr. Bennet take off their courting masks and Mr. Bennet discovers her "weak understanding and illiberal mind, [which] had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her" (155), the marriage turns sour.[2] Initially, this description may seem to support Harding's point of view: we could safely blame Mrs. Bennet for the failures of her marriage. But if we view the beginning of her marriage in Mrs. Bennet's terms, Mr. Bennet turns out to be as disappointing a husband as she is a wife. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Bennet was not looking for strong understanding or a liberal mind in her partner. She was looking for affection and financial security; she has been denied both. Mr. Bennet has chosen to withdraw his affection (Mrs. Bennet likely does not understand his reasons) and, the family lacking sons and his estate being entailed to the nearest male relative, he cannot promise his wife permanent security.

Mrs. Bennet is not one to hold back her feelings. Mr. Bennet even makes sport of her ever-present nerves: "They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least" (4). Yet Mrs. Bennet's society pressures women to be emotionally effusive. It is self-control that almost costs daughter Jane Bennet her marriage. While Jane remains unsure of her feelings for Bingley, she holds back—"as yet, she cannot even be certain of the degree of her own regard, nor of its reasonableness" (15). Elizabeth applauds this honesty, but her friend Charlotte warns her that Jane's complacent behavior might cause her to lose Bingley: "in nine cases out of ten, a woman ought to shew more affection than she feels" (15). Darcy also assumes that women express their feelings fervently and assumes that Jane's moderate behavior

indicates indifference toward Bingley. He so misunderstands Jane that he takes it upon himself to convince Bingley that Jane does not return his feelings. Thus, Jane actually loses her love because she refuses to make a gushing confession of her feelings. Elizabeth, too, later admits that Jane's feelings "though fervent, were little displayed" (137) and cannot blame Darcy for keeping Jane and Bingley apart. It turns out that Charlotte, who advocates overly emotional behavior like Mrs. Bennet's, gives the wisest advice.

Mrs. Bennet acts under this same pressure to perform her emotions for the world. During the Meryton assembly, Mr. Darcy, because he is handsome and wealthy, initially gains the admiration of all the ladies in the room. When he refuses to dance with them, however, "his character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again. Amongst the most violent against him was Mrs. Bennet" (8). Society's reaction against Mr. Darcy is extreme: they judge him "the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world." Mrs. Bennet's reaction toward Darcy reflects her society's general feeling, but, as one of the "most violent" against him, Mrs. Bennet takes to the extreme what her society mandates. She continues to denounce him within his own hearing at the Netherfield Ball because, she says, "I am sure we owe him no particular civility as to be obliged to say nothing he may not like to hear" (68). Having absorbed society's assumption that women should express their emotions loudly, and confident in her peers' support for her dislike of Darcy, Mrs. Bennet speaks on. Thus, by presenting Mrs. Bennet within the mindset of her environment, Austen implicitly criticizes her society not for merely tolerating Mrs. Bennet, as Harding claims, but for provoking her behavior.

A microcosm of society, Mrs. Bennet's family provokes her excessive emotionalism even in private. Mr. Bennet often directly goads her "uncertain temper," a quality so damning that Harding relies upon it for one-third of his proof that Mrs. Bennet is detestable.[3] After directly refusing to go visit Mr. Bingley, the new single man in town, Mr. Bennet plays with Mrs. Bennet's temper when he reveals that he has secretly gone to see Mr. Bingley after all. When Mr. Bennet walks into the room and mentions Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet becomes unreasonably upset. She speaks "resentfully" (5) and verbally lashes out about a neighbor whom Elizabeth mentions. She even redirects her anger from Mr. Bennet to Kitty: "[U]nable to contain herself, [she] began scolding one of her daughters. 'Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces'" (5). Mr. Bennet keeps prodding Mrs. Bennet into melodrama until he gets her to say exactly what he wants: "'I am sick of Mr. Bingley,' cried his wife" (6). At that moment, in which Mr. Bennet reveals that he has indeed gone to see Mr. Bingley and introduced himself, Mr. Bennet achieves his purpose, one that depends on playing with his wife's extreme emotions: "The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished; that of Mrs. Bennet perhaps surpassing the rest; though when the first tumult of joy was over…he left the room, fatigued with the raptures of his wife" (6). The intensity of Mrs. Bennet's anger is matched by her following "tumult of joy." Always in "raptures" (6) or "unable to contain herself" (5), Mrs. Bennet is nonetheless under the control of her husband, who provokes her emotions for his own amusement.

When Mrs. Bennet's "uncertain temper" is not directly provoked by her family, it can be seen as a way of coping with it. After twenty years of being disregarded, Mrs.

Bennet's level of communication has reached a fevered pitch. She desperately wants her family to respect and listen to her. After Mr. Bennet reveals that he has indeed gone to visit Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet "when the first tumult of joy was over…began to declare that it was what she had expected all the while" (6). In instigating her anger and then undermining it, Mr. Bennet has made Mrs. Bennet a fool, thus prompting her obviously untrue statement that she knew what he was doing all along and that "it is such a good joke" (6). It is not a good joke; Mr. Bennet not only scorns his wife, he also "exposes her to the contempt of her own children" (155). She tries, in her effusive way, to undo the damage he has done, telling the girls that she does "not know how you will ever make him amends for his kindness; or me either for that matter. At our time of life…" (6). Notice how she moves from referring to just Mr. Bennet, then to him and herself and, finally to "our." She needs to align herself with him. His jokes place her below her children. She is trying pathetically to lift herself up. Her absurd behavior here is a cover: if she cannot gain affection from her husband, she will at least attempt to get the respect of her children. Austen is not recommending Mrs. Bennet's behavior, but by giving us the environmental reasons behind it, Austen allows us to understand rather than simply detest Mrs. Bennet.

If Mrs. Bennet is largely a product of her environment, then it stands to reason that, given a new environment, she might have been improved. Another of the three "detestable" qualities Harding cites, "little information," is actually shared by Mrs. Bennet and her daughter Elizabeth. When Elizabeth decides that she and Mr. Darcy are right for each other, she expects that from Darcy's greater "information…she must have received benefit" (202). Elizabeth, like her mother, enters marriage with less information

than her husband. Unlike her mother, Elizabeth expects to be improved by Darcy's information; she expects her husband to share his information with her. This does not happen for Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet uses his greater information, such as that he gleans from Bingley, to make Mrs. Bennet a butt of his jokes. Therefore, when Austen writes that Mr. Bennet was "incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife" (155), we must wonder whether Mrs. Bennet's mind is impossible to enlarge or whether her husband simply is not up to the task.

Mrs. Bennet shares her "uncertain temper, little information and weak understanding" (297), three traits which Harding says prove Austen's hatred of her, with her youngest daughter, Kitty, yet Kitty is able to overcome these weaknesses at the end of the novel, when, by living mostly with her two older sisters, she enters a new environment. "In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia, and, removed from the influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant and less insipid" (252). It is important to note that this passage assigns the blame for poisoning Kitty not to Mrs. Bennet, but to Lydia. In her new environment, Kitty is able to become first "less irritable," suggesting that an "uncertain temper" is something that can be undone. She becomes "less ignorant," too. In other words, she gains "information." Lastly, Kitty becomes "less insipid," or distastefully dull. Perhaps Mrs. Bennet, too, could have shed her "mean understanding" in a better environment. Part of the reason that Kitty is able to improve is, perhaps, her age. Mrs. Bennet obviously does not improve through time spent with Jane and Elizabeth. Still, we

need not detest Mrs. Bennet, because her society and family share the blame for her behavior.

If we note how often she helps or attempts to help her family, we can even like Mrs. Bennet. Her constant quest to marry her daughters well often seems tiresome and overdone. She talks too loudly about her hopes for Jane and Bingley, and she almost forces Elizabeth into a marriage as unhappy as her own. Mrs. Bennet is desperate. She has been trying for over seven years to get her oldest and most beautiful daughter married. Resorting to all sorts of sneaky maneuvers, such as forcing Jane to ride to Bingley's estate, Netherfield, on horseback in the rain, or making sure the carriage is late to take the Bennet family home from the Netherfield ball, Mrs. Bennet tries to give Jane as much time with Bingley as possible. As Mrs. Bennet hopes, riding to Netherfield in the rain does makes Jane very ill so that she must remain for a few days. Similarly, after the Netherfield ball, Mrs. Bennet pushes the hospitality of the Bingley family to its limit by contriving for the Bennet carriage to arrive late. The Bennets see "how heartily they were wished away by some of the family," but Bingley and Jane escape the awkward scene by "standing together, a little detached from the rest and talk[ing]" (70). Although Mrs. Bennet's methods may be questionable, she is trying to help Jane toward a marriage that not only she desires, but Jane as well.

The fact that Mrs. Bennet helps Jane towards love and financial security, but settles for only financial security in matching Elizabeth with Mr. Collins may seem selfish, but Mrs. Bennet is actually trying to help not only Elizabeth, but the whole family. Because Collins will inherit Mr. Bennet's estate, leaving the Bennet women homeless and poor, Mrs. Bennet wants one of her daughters to marry Collins in order to

hold on to the family home. Trying to help all of her daughters, Mrs. Bennet recommends Elizabeth to Collins and is genuinely “startled” (75) when Elizabeth refuses the match. Mrs. Bennet has gained nothing from her marriage but her children and her house and has learned to expect little more. In attempting to hand over her situation to Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet understandably fails to comprehend the ugliness of her own position. She tries to help Elizabeth toward what she has become resigned to thinking is enough.

After Lydia elopes, Mrs. Bennet is the only member of the family (except Kitty, perhaps) who is able to love her. Jane and Elizabeth convince Mr. Bennet to let Lydia back into the house for the sake of appearances only. They do not really wish to see her. Lydia runs off with no-good Wickham, who later has to be paid to marry her. In some ways, the older sisters’ view of Lydia’s marriage can be compared to Lady Catherine’s view of Darcy’s potential marriage to Elizabeth. Even though Darcy loves Elizabeth and knows that marrying her would make him happy, Lady Catherine thinks that Elizabeth is beneath Darcy. Similarly, Elizabeth, Jane, Mary, and Mr. Bennet all look down on Lydia’s marriage, but Lydia is happy with it. They, like Lady Catherine, worry more about their reputations than their family member’s happiness. Mrs. Bennet is the only member of the family capable of looking beyond Lydia’s reputation and rejoicing with her. Mrs. Bennet does not ask what Lydia’s income with Wickham will be, even though she carefully investigates the wealth of all other suitors. Knowing that nothing can be done about Lydia’s choice now, Mrs. Bennet takes the most optimistic point of view possible and congratulates her daughter, something no one else in the family can do.

Mrs. Bennet’s behavior is also necessary for her husband’s comfort. He needs her as a butt for his jokes. Austen writes that after the marriages of Jane and Elizabeth, Mrs.

Bennet's character does not change; it is "lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly" (251). Mr. Bennet needs his wife the way she is. Sadly, while he retains a scapegoat for his humor after his daughters marry, Mrs. Bennet is left with almost nothing. When Jane and Elizabeth become married to wealthy men, she has the financial security she has always desired, but she is left only with cold, moralizing Mary for affection. She is not even allowed to visit Elizabeth at Pemberly. The last section of the novel describes Mrs. Bennet "being quite unable to sit alone" (252), needing Mary's company. While she gives her husband amusement, Mrs. Bennet still lacks the thing she wants most: affection.

Once one admits this broader perspective on Mrs. Bennet, her character can hardly be reduced, as Harding reduces it, to a single sentence. Allowing room for Mrs. Bennet's environment as well as her crucial role in her family, we see that she is hardly detestable—she is actually forgivable. Harding assumes that Austen is hiding behind her comedy, not bothering to be "missionary," but rather covertly expressing her hatred for a society she believes incapable of change.[4] By presenting Mrs. Bennet in a critical and funny, but understanding way, Austen becomes the satirist that Harding claims she is not. As a satirist, Austen helps us to deal with the Mrs. Bennets in our world. While exposing their weaknesses, we can forgive them and even try to help them. We can also, by understanding how a Mrs. Bennet comes to act like Mrs. Bennet, keep our sisters and ourselves from becoming like her.

Notes

1. D. W. Harding, "'Regulating Hatred': An Aspect in the Work of Jane Austen," in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray (New York and London: Norton, 2001), 297-298.

2. All references to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are from the Norton Critical 3rd edition, ed. Donald Gray (New York and London: Norton, 2001).

3. Harding, 297.

4. Harding, 297.

Contents

Occasions Home

PWR Home