In/Significance:

The Participation of Fathers in Jane Austen's Novels

by

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Abstract

This thesis studies the under-examined role of the father figure in two of Jane Austen's most widely read novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. In each of these works, Austen creates memorable fathers, distinguishing them, however, more by their apparent flaws and shortcomings than by their virtues. She works with the idiosyncrasies of the fathers as a source of humor and social criticism but many scholars overlook the fathers' significance beyond the providing of comic relief or acting as minor contributors to plot. In fact, I will argue, the fathers play a vital role in the development of their daughters' personalities and the social interaction they have with others. The presence of the fathers may be limited, but their influence is far reaching.

Because Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are two of Austen's most outspoken and seemingly confident heroines, tracing their development to their fathers would seem at first to conflict with the very notion of their independence. However, the relationship each woman has to her father necessarily shapes, on an unconscious level at the very least, her opinions, principles, and formation of ideals. The ongoing influence of fathers ultimately plays itself out in the ritual of courtship and the determination of a complementary husband. Whereas feminist critics commonly take a condemnatory position against fathers, I argue that the importance of fathers goes beyond a judgment of their merits and imperfections. For benefit or for drawback, the fathers affect changes and aid in cultivating the personalities of their children.

Whether Austen intends to commentate on the flaws of liberal parenting or whether she promotes more affection and communication between father and daughter, a comprehensive analysis must include a look at background historical texts, for Austen's writing inherently refers to an existing state of patriarchal authority. My introduction utilizes Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England* and Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* as reference points to gauge the involvement and detachment of Austen's fathers from their daughters, thereby providing a context in which to place the two novels.

In the first section, I examine Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Bennet, pursuing the origins of their separation from family and society. In the second section, I discuss the daughters, Emma and Elizabeth, which then leads to the third section, where I draw character connections from the fathers to daughters, explicating certain subplots or scenes that particularly illustrate how a daughter repeats her father's behavior. Finally, the fourth section concludes the thesis in a study of how the marriages of Elizabeth and Emma reveal that their priorities and desires stem from their relationship with their fathers.

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Short Titles

Emma: Austen, Jane. *Emma*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

Pride: Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Stone: Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Introduction

Given the vast body of literary criticism on Jane Austen, one would reasonably presume that every major angle has been pursued. However, there are surprisingly few essays or books that dedicate themselves to an examination of the father figure. Within that small collection, most of the criticism focuses on the father as comic relief or as a supporting character toward plot. Rather than allow the dislikable characteristics to cloud the overall assessment of the fathers, however, I contend that Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse, two of Austen's most memorable father creations, exercise more influence over their daughters than critics believe. The fathers play a key role in the development of their daughters' personalities, and though their presence may be limited, their effects are far-reaching into the novels.

Because Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet seem to be such outspoken and confident heroines, tracing their development to the fathers would seem at first to conflict with the very notion of their independence. However, the relationship each woman has to her father necessarily shapes, on an unconscious level at the very least, her opinions, principles, and formation of ideals. Such an ongoing influence ultimately plays itself out in the ritual of courtship and the determination of a complementary husband.

In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, I explore the nuances of the father-daughter relationships, explicating passages to illustrate how a daughter internalizes aspects of her father's behavior and can at times exhibit strikingly similar attitudes when interacting with peers. Austen frequently arranges the structure of the plot so that one episode in

which the father is the focus precedes another in which the daughter displays a variation of her father's example.

In an article on the absent father in Austen's novels, Christine Gibbs places nearly full responsibility on the fathers for what she considers the poor social education of their daughters:

> Viewed as a group the heroines of her novels have been endowed with a most unsatisfactory set of fathers. They fail to guide and protect their daughters, interfere with their progress towards maturity, or simply absent themselves from the responsibilities of fatherhood, with potentially disastrous consequences.[1]

It is true that Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse embody many undesirable traits; they certainly abstain from explicitly advising their daughters, and some may view their limited participation as interference. Yet Austen does not intend completely to denounce them as characters. As Jane Nardin states, regarding the Austen heroine: "Her family background must help to explain her good traits, as well as her serious flaws and her early errors."[2] My goal is neither to condemn nor to defend the fathers, though in the course of investigating their character and actions I inevitably do both, but rather to prove that they serve an important purpose. The seeming paradox of the fathers' simultaneously beneficial and detrimental role naturally complicates, but does not weaken the force of their behavior.

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[1] Christine Gibbs, "Absent Fathers: An Examination of Father-Daughter Relationships in Jane Austen's Novels," *Persuasions* 8 (1986): 45. Hereafter cited as Gibbs.

[2] Jane Nardin, "Children and Their Families," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (Holmes & Meier, 1983), 73. Hereafter cited as Nardin.

When Gibbs mentions the "responsibilities of fatherhood," moreover, she does not define those duties. However, she does raise an important question concerning the social standard of Austen's time. Austen's focus remains the development of her heroines, but a better sense of the kind of social commentary Austen may be making in her characterization of fathers must make reference to some set of standards. Her contemporary readers certainly understood what kind of fathers existed and how close to or far off the mark Austen's fictional creations hit, but reading and judging the fathers as modern readers may not allow for a fair appreciation of the duties which Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse do perform.

Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* documents the shifting of family dynamics in England, citing hundreds of case studies that mark a trend moving away from traditional patriarchal authority to a more permissive domestic setting. In his book, he covers the wide range of the strictest to the most lenient parenting:

> Between the remote, unfriendly attitude of early seventeenth-century upper-class parents, with their ruthless methods of crushing the will of the child, and the affectionate permissiveness of the mid and late eighteenth century, there was an intermediate stage, when the parents became affectionate towards their children, but still retained very tight control over them, now by psychological rather than physical means.[3]

Stone later theorizes that the harshness of seventeenth century discipline evoked the extreme opposite late in the eighteenth century, causing parents to throw out the rod and

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[3] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 433. Hereafter cited as Stone.

all pretense of discipline in favor of an amicable, equal relationship in which parent and child interacted more as friends. The intermediate stage he mentions still retains the idea of control; however, Stone's studies show very little success in parenting under all three phases of parent-child relations. As parents attempted to settle upon the most humane and efficient method of child rearing, children gained a louder and more authoritative voice. In most of the case studies, the parental affection Stone mentions serves more as the last, futile connection to the children rather than as the means of any type of actual control. Regarding marriage, Stone writes that in lower middle-class families "it was inevitable that financial consideration should continue to play a very large part in marriage plans, even though the decisions were left to the children" (Stone 294). The emphasis here is not on the importance of money, but more on who wears the mantle of decision-making.

While Stone's *Family, Sex, and Marriage* offers a scientific kind of a study, something of a descriptive census, a second historical document, Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1823), presents a non-fictional account of one father's concern for his daughters in a written form. The tone of the *Legacy* greatly differs from Stone in that Gregory imparts his very personal set of principles and advices directly to his daughters through the intimacy of a father's last words. Gregory details a general code of conduct he believes to be fitting for a proper young woman, offering his own male point of view to back up his claims of the urgency for women to be on their guard at all times and in all matters. In light of Stone's report on the general decreasing value of parental involvement in England, Gregory's thoughtful legacy marks an exception that is ideal only in that one can not know for certain how closely the Father resembled the

Writer. Even from a contemporary perspective, we might still hold Gregory as an ideal. The liberalism that Stone studies continues into the present age in many respects, thus a reading of Gregory's carefully thought out values strikes a refreshing chord in its consideration and nurturing foresight.

The combination of the Stone's historical and Gregory's ideal forms a contextual backdrop for this thesis and therefore, my strategy often weighs the actions and inactions of the fathers according to the spectrum these authors offer. My focus, like Austen's, remains centered on the heroines. The first chapter begins the examination of Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse separately, gaining an understanding of their personalities and their respective situations. A study of the daughters, Elizabeth and Emma, follows. After identifying and assessing the personalities of the four major characters, I discuss the influences within each pair of father and daughter. Finally, I explore marriage—the conclusive event of every Austen novel and the final demonstration of a father's influence. Along the way, I agree and disagree with some of the well-established critics of Austen's work, seeking to ultimately prove that a father, even when largely absent, remains an ever guiding force in his child's life.

CHAPTER ONE

"The True Philosopher" and The Complacent Worrier

The passive and cynical personality of Mr. Bennet can theoretically be attributed to the overwhelming dominance of women in *Pride and Prejudice*. As the father and sole male member of his family, Mr. Bennet stands as the possible pillar of reason and intellect in his home. Yet rather than share his knowledge with his wife and daughters, he quixotically sequesters himself to his library as much as possible. Similarly, Mr. Woodhouse, of *Emma*, withdraws himself from others, but for far different reasons than the seemingly rational Mr. Bennet. In fact, Mr. Woodhouse's personality could hardly be more opposite from Mr. Bennet's: the constant bustle in Longbourn causes Mr. Bennet to isolate himself, while the emotionally dependent Mr. Woodhouse cannot endure being away from the comfort of his home. He requires specific and constant care in order to be comfortable, if not perfectly content. That comfort comes at the cost of other people's needs and desires, not the least of which are his own daughter's.

Mr. Bennet's wry distance from his family presents the only gentleman-like escape from a house full of silly women. His sarcasm and judgmental tendencies plausibly arise from his producing a primarily unsatisfying marriage. Mr. Bennet also has a sarcastic attitude toward life because of his failure to produce a male heir, instead producing potential disaster for his daughters. Thus, he makes fun of his own unhappy isolation because it is his nature to go on with life rather than wallow in disappointment.

Mr. Bennet is "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."[4] The marriage clearly provides very little happiness to husband and wife, and even producing five children cannot bridge the gap between them. But if Mr. Bennet laments his choice of mate, he must blame himself for the mistake:

> [C]aptivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, [Mr. Bennet] had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (*Pride* 262)

For a common mistake of youth, marrying for beauty rather than personality, Mr. Bennet pays a lifelong price and reacts with a stilted humor and retreat. As a man who values understanding, he regrets not having taken better care to choose a woman who could intellectually match him. But "where the other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given" (*Pride* 262). Mr. Bennet endures his sentence as best he can; he does not have his eldest daughter Jane's sweet disposition and seemingly unending capacity for forbearance, yet he weathers his insipid marriage calmly, and though he cannot love his wife, he finds her curiously amusing.

Susan Fraiman likens Mr. Bennet's laid back attitude to a sort of Lockean patriarch, advocating "instruction over discipline and reason over force."[5] Although Fraiman paints a more sympathetic portrait of Mr. Bennet than many other critics, her interpretation of Mr. Bennet includes a reading of him as responsible for Elizabeth's

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[4] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 53. Hereafter cited as *Pride*.
[5] Susan Fraiman, "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet," in *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, ed. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 169. Hereafter cited as Fraiman.

sense of irony: "To her he bequeaths his ironic distance from the world, the habit of studying and appraising those around him, the role of social critic," she says (Fraiman 171). As a self-appointed social critic, Mr. Bennet offers his biting commentaries on mindless pursuits such as his younger daughters' excursions to visit the officers stationed at Meryton, but he comments in such an indifferent, quiet way that no one takes him seriously, assuming they hear him at all.

One problem with Fraiman's interpretation of Bennet as embodying Lockean principles is that just because he espouses reason over force does not mean he imparts reason and good judgment skills to his daughters in place of discipline. That is, in theory he likely advocates instruction, but in practice he has little communication with his family except to laugh at them. Thus far, Fraiman's Lockean theory applies to Mr. Bennet, but Stone explains that "Locke was clearly not an apostle of childish autonomy and parental permissiveness, but he differed widely from those theorists earlier in the century who advised constant distance and coldness, and the enforcement of deference and obedience by the use of force" (Stone 407). Mr. Bennet's "distance and coldness" arise more out of his passivity than as a deliberate effort to raise his children with a harsh hand. Christine Gibbs represents the critical consensus when she describes Mr. Bennet as "an intelligent man, but selfish and lazy, regarding with sardonic humor his wife's attempts to marry off their daughters, when in fact marriage is a stark necessity for them all" (Gibbs 47). In pronouncing her judgment, Gibbs hits on another important point—that of providing for the girls' future. Because Mr. Bennet does not have the means or enough foresight to provide for his daughters upon his demise, such lack of planning provokes criticism of him as lazy and negligent.

Stone would agree that no matter what, the basic duties of fatherhood include settling the family's financial circumstances: "The three objectives of family planning were the continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances." (Stone 42). Mr. and Mrs. Bennet unfortunately place too much confidence in their ability to produce a male heir, and when it becomes clear that there will be no son to cut off the entailment of the estate, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet react oppositely in considering their children's options. Mr. Bennet backs away while Mrs. Bennet pursues husbands for them.

Even though Mrs. Bennet had planned with her husband for a son, she naturally aligns herself with her victimized children: "I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it" (*Pride* 106). Mrs. Bennet may not understand the entailment system and the irreversibility of the arrangement, but she feels strongly the need for something to be done. Left to her own resources, she does the only thing she knows how to do—she pushes her daughters into marriage. Having caught Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet knows how to capture a man's interest, even if momentarily. To be sure, the abandon with which she throws her daughters in the paths of eligible bachelors (e.g. her insistence that Jane ride horseback to Netherfield in order to catch cold and stay on as Mr. Bingley's guest) lessens the reader's respect for her, but she must feel she has few alternatives.

Marvin Mudrick sympathizes with Mrs. Bennet's desperation, clearly citing Mr. Bennet as the primary cause of her predicament:

> An inadequate mind to begin with, marriage to a man who treats her with contempt only, preoccupation with the insistent material concerns imposed by society upon a woman of her class—they have all combined in Mrs. Bennet's single continuously operating motive: to be herself secure and comfortable, and to fortify her own security by getting her daughters settled in prudent marriage, that condition symbolic of material well-being.[6]

Mudrick's assignation of blame on Mr. Bennet, while reinstating the traditional burden of duty onto the man's shoulders, provides a rare insight into Mrs. Bennet's frame of mind. Just as readers have difficulty penetrating through Mr. Bennet's dry humor, so do they get too easily caught up in their annoyance with Mrs. Bennet's outbursts and flightiness to give credit to her efforts. She compounds the concern of two parents into one, thereby accounting for her exaggerated excitement and determination to do right by her daughters.

Pride and Prejudice opens with the addition of a new neighbor, Mr. Bingley, who instantly finds himself the talk of the town. Mr. Bennet's vow not to pay the much-desired visit to the eligible young man provokes the first of many fits, but he characteristically laughs off his wife's pleas and expostulations against his refusal to cooperate. The next chapter reveals that Mr. Bennet had always intended to visit Netherfield, and this inconsistency marks the beginning of Mr. Bennet's strange propensity to distress his wife. His motives remain a mystery, for bit by bit, Austen reveals Mr. Bennet's disdain for his family life, yet he takes such pleasure in surprising

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[6] Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 99. Hereafter cited as Mudrick.

his family with his unexpected favors. He taunts his wife and leads her to believe Mr. Bingley will forever be a stranger to them, waiting until she explodes in irritation and resentment to uncover the wonderful truth. From the audience's perspective, the interaction between husband and wife affords no end of hilarity, but at the same time, a second, closer look at the relationship clarifies where the burden of responsibility ought to lie.

Similarly, in *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse's personality defies simple categorization, despite the dismissive approach most critics take in explaining his role. The narrator of *Emma* views Mr. Woodhouse with a benevolent perspective that several critics readily espouse, but his harmless manner of concerning himself with the details of everybody's health does not alter the fact that at the root lies a constant need to force his opinions on others. He complains most frequently on how marriage takes people away from him, even when someone as dear to him as the governess, Miss Taylor, happily weds at the beginning of the novel: "[F]rom his habits of gentle selfishness, and of being never able to suppose that other people could feel differently from himself, he was very much disposed to think Miss Taylor had done as sad a thing for herself as for them."[7] His selfishness, though cushioned by mildness, nevertheless remains a flaw that recurs throughout the novel.

This "sad thing" that Miss Taylor has done to depress Mr. Woodhouse so deeply is an evil that he ardently discourages every unmarried person from committing—getting married. What everyone else considers a joyful event, Mr. Woodhouse sees only in relation to his own happiness. He constantly sighs on behalf of "Poor Miss Taylor" even

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[7] Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 7. Hereafter cited as *Emma*.

after she quite happily settles into her new home and life as "Mrs. Weston." He continues to call her by her former name but his seeming forgetfulness about her change of status scarcely conceals his refusal to conceive of a happier existence than one at Hartfield with him. F. B. Pinion identifies Mr. Woodhouse by the oxymoronic phrase "selfishly altruistic" and classifies him, the pretentious Eltons, and chattering Miss Bates as "four great characters [in] Jane Austen's gallery of eccentrics."[8] Unfortunately, Pinion's analysis of Mr. Woodhouse does not go further, and in fact, to place this character under the general category of eccentricity gives into the temptation to read Mr. Woodhouse as purely comical and unimportant to Emma. Pinion's awareness of the selfish undercurrent of his behavior signals a dual nature that merits further exploration, for lurking beneath his benign attention is an egotism that secretly must have irked the recipients of his unsolicited advice.

One example of Mr. Woodhouse's anxiety takes place at Miss Taylor's wedding. Austen shows Mr. Woodhouse reacting to his own bad digestion, but it is too early for the reader to discern the irritating oppressiveness of his concern. The reader only witnesses Mr. Woodhouse's bizarre contentment in worrying needlessly over minor situations:

> His own stomach could bear nothing rich, and he could never believe other people to be different from himself. What was unwholesome to him, he regarded as unfit for any body; and he had, therefore, earnestly tried to dissuade them from having any wedding cake at all . . .. (*Emma* 15)

At once Austen depicts Mr. Woodhouse as a man of sensitive constitution and a friendly, slightly meddling disposition. His worrisome nature does not disrupt the pleasant

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[8] F.B. Pinion, *A Jane Austen Companion: A critical survey and reference book* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1973), 121.

atmosphere of the wedding even though he must persist until his doctor, Perry, admits to the cake's *potential* to upset one's stomach. Rather than leave the episode as a forgettable display of Mr. Woodhouse's odd nature, Austen draws attention to the ridiculous degree of his stubbornness; when he hears "a strange rumour in Highbury of all the Perrys being seen with a slice of Mrs. Weston's wedding cake in their hands . . . [he] would never believe it" (*Emma* 16). After badgering Perry into halfheartedly agreeing with him, Mr. Woodhouse secures the validation he needs for an opinion that only he holds. Behind the tolerant smiles of the Perrys, Westons, and other guests of the wedding exists an unspoken knowledge that ultimately Mr. Woodhouse believes what he wants to believe and feels most comfortable, oddly enough, when immersed in anxiety. Hence it is far easier to agree than to argue. Mr. Woodhouse's inability to concede defeat in so trifling a matter sets up a consistent need to have his own way and center a part of every event on himself.

The erratic obsession over convincing everyone not to eat Mrs. Weston's cake thus begins the complex portrait of Mr. Woodhouse. On the surface, he merely fidgets and nags out of fatherly anxiety, but really Mr. Woodhouse looks for opportunities to impress his opinions on others. The irony rests in his willing self-deception: he must know that Perry does not *truly* agree with him, but the idea that he could be wrong proves to be too difficult for him to admit. This refusal discloses much more about his nature than the popular reading of his silliness.

Perhaps Mr. Woodhouse and his dependency can be seen as a result of his environment; Austen's narrator does not indicate whether the death of Mrs. Woodhouse caused a significant change in his character, but one can imagine that the loss of his wife

leads at least partially to his fear of losing others. He must depend on Emma to fill his wife's place as his caretaker. Without Emma, Mr. Woodhouse has no one left in his life. When she schemes to find a wife for Mr. Elton the evening of Mrs. Weston's wedding, Mr. Woodhouse begs her, "'my dear, pray do not make any more matches, they are silly things, and break up one's family circle grievously'" (*Emma* 11). His aversion to marriage may not be reasonable, but could be understood as the result of his elder daughter Isabella's removal from Hartfield, and now Mrs. Weston's as well. Mr. Woodhouse fears being alone, and the decreasing membership of his home can only strengthen his distaste for marriage. And because his wealth amply provides for his and Emma's needs, he sees no practical need for Emma to marry at all.

CHAPTER TWO

The Epiphanies: Elizabeth and Emma

Though Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet come from different places in the financial spectrum, the two young women have much in common. Their wit and intelligence sets them apart from their sisters as well as their peers. To varying degrees, Emma and Elizabeth share a defiant attitude toward social manners. Elizabeth boldly treads her own path regardless of etiquette, made evident by her expedition to visit her sister Jane at Netherfield when she becomes ill. Appearance and details take secondary importance when it comes to family, and the sneering disapproval of the cultured elite does not faze her in the least, for as Mr. Darcy later suggests to Elizabeth, "[w]e neither of us perform to strangers" (*Pride* 209). He speaks of his own standoffishness and her self-confidence, but such independence extends to Emma Woodhouse as well. Though she hails from a prestigious lineage that places the Woodhouses in a position of eminence in Highbury, Emma also rebels from the role society expects of her—the kind of role in which Mrs. Elton revels. It is not long before Emma discerns Mrs. Elton's arrogance and condescension, eager to "shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school" (*Emma* 205). For instance, when Mrs. Elton suggests forming an elite musical club, Emma declines because she finds such exhibitionism distasteful, even though *her* own respectable manners would permit her to form any social club she may desire (*Emma* 209).

Like Elizabeth, Emma plays her own personality and dictates her own terms. But in her desire to lead an independent life and her "having rather too much her own way,

and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (*Emma* 5), she sometimes takes on a stubbornness that resurfaces up to the close of the novel. She may fulfill the basic duties of attending old friends and bringing food to the poor, but the admired return of Jane Fairfax and the conspicuous socializing of Mrs. Elton threaten Emma's role of importance in Highbury.

One might interpret Emma's distancing of herself from relationships and potential romances as a derivation of trying to identify with her father's narrow-mindedness about marriage. Because he views other people relative to how they change his own situation, she cannot help but adopt a similar self-centeredness that restricts her ability to cultivate healthy friendships. Many of Austen's characters greatly mistake others; Elizabeth and Darcy both misjudge each other, while Emma mistakes the basic value of human relationships. But then in light of the Eltons' all too apparent snobbery, Emma learns that not all marriages are the same. She must acknowledge in recognizing a bad marriage, there must also be the possibility of good marriages—perhaps even one that may benefit herself.

When Emma does realize her injuries to others, she tries very nobly to restore good feeling, but she owes her successful campaign to win Jane Fairfax's forgiveness, for example, not to her elegant apology, but because of Jane's generosity and guilty conscience about leading a life of secrecy. Likewise, when Emma tries to restore her relationship with Miss Bates, after offending her during a group outing to Box Hill, Miss Bates's forbearing nature allows a reconciliation to occur—not Emma's act of contrition alone.

Mr. Woodhouse's indulgent and overly affectionate treatment of Emma removes the possibility of his role as a disciplinarian; thus Emma assumes the post of mistress very early (*Emma* 5). In fact, her early reign thoroughly spoils her and gives her an aggrandized sense of superiority and arrogance. But despite the appearance of Emma's absolute authority in Hartfield, no matter what she wants to do or where she wants to go, Mr. Woodhouse's consideration clouds every plan. Privately, Emma is aware of the restrictions he imposes on her social life, so she does her best to work around them through cajoling, manipulating, and when all else fails, hoping for a lucky break.

Every outing and even every dinner at Hartfield must be arranged in order to accommodate Mr. Woodhouse's specifications. Even when he does not join a party, Mr. Woodhouse presents a formidable obstacle in Emma's ability to attend. When Emma finally secures an invitation to the Cole's dinner party, she must still overcome one more hurdle:

> Mr. Woodhouse was to be talked into an acquiescence of his daughter's going out to dinner on a day now near at hand, and spending the whole evening away from him. As for his going, Emma did not wish him to think it possible; the hours would be too late, and the party too numerous. He was soon pretty well resigned. (*Emma* 157)

For private reasons, Emma does not want her father to go. The ostensible reason—consideration for his comfort—cannot be her sole motivation for keeping him away. Emma entertains ideas of Frank Churchill as a potential husband at this time, therefore the reader can presume that she wishes her father to be out of the way for her own reasons rather than his. Certainly Emma knows her father, the staunch opponent of

marriage, would hinder romantic developments should he by some chance perceive an attraction between Emma and Frank. She understands his fretfulness enough to see that "Mr. Weston (vainly attempting to assist Emma in soothing Mr. Woodhouse) must be quiet, and every thing deliberately arranged" (*Emma* 158). Just as her father requires special handling even to obtain his consent to go out, she knows from experience that once out in company, taking the required pains to keep him content takes too much energy to permit her the enjoyment of Frank's company and chance to explore his character.

Thus, the only checks to Emma's happiness are Mr. Knightley's rebukes and Mr. Woodhouse's fears of inclement weather. But spoiled as she is, Emma does her duty by her father. Her love for him exceeds even her self-love, and the turmoil she experiences in even considering leaving Hartfield to marry Mr. Knightley must attest to her sincere attachment to her father.

Unlike Emma with her fondness for home, Elizabeth can hardly wait to leave Longbourn. The second daughter and Mr. Bennet's favorite, Elizabeth stands slightly apart because she has "something more of quickness than her sisters" (*Pride* 52). She transforms her father's cynicism, or perhaps we might say his strong wit, into her own intrepid air and lively banter, thereby capturing not only her father's attention, but the admiration of Mr. Darcy as well. Jane Nardin similarly acknowledges the direct connection: "Elizabeth Bennet's character has been influenced, more deeply than she realizes, by her father, the parent she naturally resembles. Elizabeth's quick intellect and sparkling wit come to her from her father, and she is his favorite daughter precisely for this reason" (Nardin 74).

In her book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler takes a harsher, condemnatory perspective on both Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth as she observes the similarity of their shortcomings:

> The moral exposure of Mr. Bennet is a further examination of the vices that Elizabeth, to a less culpable degree, has shared: for she is quite as much the product of her father's influence as Darcy was of his. It is from her father that she derives the tendency that is in her to misanthropy . . .. [9]

Elizabeth's fearlessness does echo a father's example, for she enjoys a good laugh at another's expense as much as her father; however, I disagree with it being only misanthropy, for Butler greatly exaggerates Elizabeth's amusement with the absurd. Elizabeth herself explains to Mr. Darcy, "I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can." (*Pride* 102). Elizabeth does not claim to be perfect, rather she owns up to her sardonic humor with an honesty that endears her to readers. Elizabeth assesses herself but draws her own lines of propriety. Surrounded by nonsense on a daily basis in the form of her mother and sisters, Elizabeth laughs because, like her father, she sees it as a harmless way of coping with an unfortunate reality. And while Mr. Darcy may wonder at the limits of Elizabeth's ridicule, she imposes a rule upon herself to respect the wise.

Wise and good as Mr. Darcy is, even the sophisticated class must be susceptible to folly, thus when he callously slights her appearance at the opening assembly, deeming her "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (*Pride* 59), her ability to laugh at him and shake off his insult captures Mr. Darcy's attention, who has for so long been

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[9] Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 210.

accustomed to women fawning over him and even literally manipulating themselves into his line of vision.[10]

Yet Elizabeth, after all, *is* human, and despite her claims not to care about Mr. Darcy and his opinions, she secretly determines to think badly of him, showing for the first time a capacity for holding grudges. Elizabeth, though laughing at Mr. Darcy's arrogance, feels the insult and decides from that moment on to dislike him. She admits to herself that "He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (*Pride* 70). Elizabeth, accustomed to mocking others, finds herself uncomfortably on the other side of mockery. A less confident person would avoid Mr. Darcy altogether, but because of Elizabeth's strong sense of self, she changes her self-consciousness into "impertinence."

Even after identifying Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy, Butler's label of "misanthropy" too generally and inaccurately classifies Elizabeth. Next to Jane, perhaps Elizabeth appears misanthropic, but as Elizabeth tells her: "you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life" (*Pride* 62). Undoubtedly, Jane's good nature recommends her highly to any company, but her giving premature credit to people like Miss Bingley must be as much of a folly as Elizabeth's reluctance to trust. Hence, Jane's optimism and uniform niceness not only make her undiscerning at times, but her predictability does not make her exciting as a character when contrasted with Elizabeth. To not recognize the sinister intentions

[10] I cite the specific incident at Netherfield on page 100 of *Pride*, where Caroline Bingley walks around the room for the sole purpose of attracting Mr. Darcy's attention. Failing to do so, her desperation drives her to invite Elizabeth to walk with her, knowing it is the only way he will look up from his book.

and snobbery of Miss Bingley exposes Jane's naivete. Furthermore, her ignorance serves to worsen her injuries when Miss Bingley's snobbery turns against her. Elizabeth, however, maintains such an effective distance from everyone, that she creates an impenetrable aura of defense, opening up in a safely joking manner, if at all.

CHAPTER THREE

The Legacy of Fathers to Daughters

Elizabeth learns from her father how to judge prematurely; Mr. Bennet may be right in judging his nephew Mr. Collins a fool too early, but she is wrong about Darcy. One decision prevents her from a bad marriage, but the other nearly prevents from a good one. But regardless of outcome, the judgments are made unfairly. A clear example of Mr. Bennet's penchant for ridiculing others occurs when Mr. Collins pays a visit to Longbourn. As usual, Mr. Bennet does not give his family notice, instead announcing the visit of this previously unknown relation the very morning of his arrival. He furnishes and reads aloud Mr. Collins' letter, and Elizabeth, ever quick to pick up on "follies and nonsense," remarks, "He must be an oddity, I think . . . There is something very pompous in his stile . . . Can he be a sensible man, sir?" Mr. Bennet shows neither special regard nor understanding in his prompt response: "No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him" (*Pride* 108). Rather than check Elizabeth and remind her that she ought not to form judgments so quickly, especially before meeting her cousin first, he affirms and encourages her first impression of Mr. Collins as an oddity. She asks if he is sensible, evidently expecting him to agree with her that he is not.

Even though Mr. Collins is a respectable clergyman and the son of Mr. Bennet's brother, Mr. Bennet shows no intention of giving him the chance to make a good impression with his family. Interestingly, Mr. Collins does the Bennets a favor in coming

to them, considering that Longbourn will be his upon entailment when Mr. Bennet dies. His rather obvious intention of marrying one of his "fair cousins" undeniably suits his agenda, but it would also preserve for the Bennet family a great sense of stability. Perhaps this condescension to help them causes Mr. Bennet so quickly to decide to dislike him. No doubt Mr. Bennet has his own pride, though he rarely, if ever, displays it. Regardless, Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth waste little time in assessing Mr. Collins' faults and ridiculing the formality of his letter.

When Mr. Collins arrives for dinner, Mr. Bennet's behavior improves only marginally. But his initial silence during the meal enables him to observe Mr. Collins' sycophantic obsession with Lady Catherine de Bourgh. When he finally joins in the conversation, he baits Mr. Collins to further expose his foolishness by "start[ing] a subject in which he expected him to shine, by observing that he seemed very fortunate in his patroness" (*Pride* 111). Mr. Bennet cannot converse politely; he must poke fun at Mr. Collins and make his guest the unwitting butt of a private joke. Because Mr. Collins is so ridiculous, Mr. Bennet cannot resist: "You judge very properly . . . and it is happy for you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy. May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?" (*Pride* 112). Mr. Collins speaks with too much ceremony and embellishment *not* to have practiced, but he mistakes Mr. Bennet's sarcastic admiration for sincerity. Mr. Collins proves himself "as absurd as [Mr. Bennet] had hoped, and he listens 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" (*Pride* 113). Austen has the reader see how a father brings in his daughter's

attention, and in this scene, Mr. Bennet actually sets an example of ungentlemanly behavior which Elizabeth may later appreciate when she reflects on Darcy's silence in the face of Wickham's outlandish accusations against him.[11]

Mr. Bennet's layered admiration fools everyone but Elizabeth. Father and daughter are co-conspirators: they are the wisest, quickest ones in the room and their superiority gives them something by which they can disassociate themselves. The entire scene, while highly entertaining since Mr. Collins' awkwardness really does cause one to laugh at him, exposes Mr. Bennet's own pleasure in ridiculing an easy target.

Because Elizabeth witnesses her father treat his guest so poorly, her own manner of behavior with those she finds amusing and self-important follows suit. The pleasure she takes in judging Mr. Collins along with her father furthers her relationship with Mr. Bennet, likewise the bridge between Elizabeth and Mr. Wickham is Mr. Darcy. The attitude of pre-judging makes it difficult for Elizabeth to see Darcy later as anything than a villain. And so Elizabeth's conversation with Wickham imperceptibly, but unmistakably patterns itself after her father's manner of speaking to Mr. Collins the previous evening. Elizabeth's animated discussion with Wickham, making Mr. Darcy the victim of their shared contempt, too quickly gives into the lure of finding an ally in gossiping. Mary Poovey discusses Elizabeth's bonding with Wickham as the beginning of her downfall:

> One of the first indications that Elizabeth's quick wit and powerful feelings may be unreliable moral guides emerges in her initial conversation with George Wickham. Until this moment, Elizabeth's

[11] After Darcy's botched first proposal, Elizabeth attacks his supposed mistreatment of Mr. Wickham, but he takes time to defend himself by letter, when he is more composed and rational (*Pride* 223).

> companions and the setting in which she has appeared have enhanced her charm and appeal.[12]

Finding a similarly spurned companion in Wickham, Elizabeth indulges her criticisms of Mr. Darcy and spends much of the evening swapping stories about his haughtiness and general disfavor with the town. Having just partaken in her father's inappropriate judgment and ridicule of Mr. Collins, Elizabeth continues to ride the momentum of social criticism and overlooks the inappropriateness of the premature openness between herself and Mr. Wickham.

Because Elizabeth and Emma lack explicit guidance from their fathers, blaming them entirely for their blunders does not fully acknowledge the root of their problems. Gregory repeatedly instructs his daughters as to the proper carriage a woman ought to bear, stating "I should be glad that you had an easy dignity in your behaviour at public places, but not that confident ease, that unabashed countenance, which seems to set the company at defiance."[13] Fortunately for Emma and Elizabeth, their conduct does not cause any lasting damage, but a simple warning from a concerned, observant father could prevent the painful necessity to learn these lessons in public. According to Gregory, "Wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess. It must be guarded with great discretion and good nature, otherwise it will create you many enemies . . . Wit is so flattering to vanity, that they who possess it become intoxicated, and loose all self-command" (Gregory 15). Again, Elizabeth survives her learning period creating few enemies (even Lady Catherine de Bourgh gives up her resentment and visits Pemberley in the end), but

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[12] Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 196.

[13] John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, Troy: W. J. Disturnell, 1823, 15. Hereafter cited as Gregory.

it is unfortunate that Mr. Bennet is not the type of father who could give Gregory's advice. His disappointment and dissatisfaction with his family life clouds his judgment when it comes to raising his children. Even Elizabeth, his self-proclaimed favorite, cannot hold a high enough favor to induce him to become more involved as a father.

But strong involvement alone may not save the value of a father's significance to a daughter. As Mr. Woodhouse's primary companion, Emma cannot help but to incorporate his attitude into her own, as Elizabeth does with her own father's. However, whereas Mr. Woodhouse tries to dictate even matters of digestion, Emma sets out to change far more significant opinions than what her friends should eat and what they should avoid. The injurious potential of her selfishness makes her behavior less permissible than her father's, although the underlying current—excessive self-importance—clearly originates from witnessing how Mr. Woodhouse's high position in society still retains the respect of his friends despite his foolishness.

Mr. Woodhouse's influence upon Emma, though less obvious than his effect upon Isabella, who shares his hypochondriac tendencies and fidgety nature, is just as palpable. Emma's manifestations of her father's faults are less conspicuous because she possesses more wit and intelligence than her sister—a fact acknowledged by both the Woodhouses and the Knightleys—but several displays of attitude toward others point to her evident (and probably unconscious) adoption of Mr. Woodhouse's self-centeredness.

But in part, Emma's inclination to arrange also comes from her dutiful attention to Mr. Woodhouse: "Accustomed to look after her father's every whim and to forestall his every possible discomfort, she tries to extend this duty over her circle of friends and acquaintances as well" (Mudrick 187). Well practiced in the art of management by the

ripe young age of twenty-one, Emma's first opportunity to exercise her influence over an outside party makes an unfortunate victim of Harriet Smith. Like Mr. Woodhouse, Emma intends no real harm, but her behavior takes a negative turn in its aim of self-exaltation. Her alleviation of her father's discomfort is admirable; taking advantage of Harriet's awe-inspired malleability is distasteful and indecorous.

Mark Schorer's essay in Ian Watt's compilation of critical essays on Austen proposes that Emma's charity is the primary source of her vanity, and "next, of power, for through the exercise of her charity, she succeeds in the imposition of her will."[14] Emma best exemplifies this imposition of will to which Schorer refers in her tutelage of Harriet. Though Emma hardly knows her, one evening of dining together convinces her of Harriet's need for privileged guidance. From the first encounter, Emma is pre-disposed to think well of Harriet, perhaps even more than she should: "This is the clever and sophisticated Emma, transported by the presence of the most insipid girl imaginable" (Mudrick 190). Harriet represents one of Emma's clearest inestimations of rank and character. Though Harriet's parentage remains a mystery, Emma uses the mystery to further her own fantasies of Harriet's legitimate origins, perhaps because she sees in Harriet an opportunity to become a parent herself. Because Harriet shows the proper respect for the comparative grandeur of Hartfield, Emma feels that:

> She must have good sense and deserve encouragement. Encouragement should be given. Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends

[14] Mark Schorer, "The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 105.

> from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm . . . they must be coarse and unpolished, and very unfit to be the intimates of a girl who wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect. (*Emma* 9)

Here Emma shows another inconsistency in her assumptions about Harriet's social circle. Emma, wanting to orchestrate Harriet's improvement, needs to be captivated by Harriet's beauty and gracefulness to justify making a decision on Harriet's behalf to bring her into her own social set because such promising qualities would be better appreciated at Hartfield. Because of her need to elevate Harriet high enough to warrant her notice, Emma passes judgment on Harriet's friends. Her thoughts are unspoken but the reader might quite clearly hear Emma speak them with a sneer. The "very good sort of people" are guilty only of being intolerably ordinary, but they bear the brunt of Emma's blame nonetheless. And in her hastiness to pave the road of a possible friendship, Emma forgets that if Harriet's friends are really so coarse and unpolished as to cause harm, Harriet might not be able to possess the very graces that catch Emma's attention. Thus, her inconsistent logic betrays her true motive; Emma cares about Harriet only as a measuring stick for her own influence. Her appraisal of Harriet's positive qualities quickly gives way to deficiencies, thereby providing a place for Emma to intervene: "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners" (*Emma* 9).

Not once does Emma stop to ask Harriet whether she is unhappy with her former acquaintance. Instead, she blinds herself with her impulse to control and play mentor to the wholly trusting Harriet. Emma, who cannot believe Harriet to be different from

herself in thought, decides that what is repellent to her must be unfit for Harriet as well—namely a union with Robert Martin. Her replacement of Harriet's opinions and manners directly parallels Mr. Woodhouse's attempted coercion of Mrs. Weston's wedding guests to refrain from eating cake. The situational content differs, but Emma's conduct echoes her father's. Engulfed by his opinionated stubbornness, Emma ignores Harriet's delight with Mr. Martin's attentions and she quickly judges him by her own standards, not her friend's. As Emma advises Harriet against Mr. Martin, she stresses the necessity to marry as genteel a husband possible: "The older a person grows, Harriet, the more important it is that their manner should not be bad—the more glaring and disgusting any loudness, or coarseness, or awkwardness becomes. What is passable in youth, is detestable in later age" (*Emma* 26). Emma focuses so intently on Mr. Martin's humble means that she does not recognize how her judgment disregards what he can add to Harriet's life. Mr. Knightley later argues with Emma, declaring that if there *is* a mismatch between Robert Martin and Harriet Smith, Mr. Martin is the one who deserves better. But as Mr. Martin's friend, Knightley puts his own scruples aside:

> I could not reason so to a man in love, and was willing to trust to there being no harm in [Harriet], to her having that sort of disposition, which, in good hands, like his, might be easily led aright and turn out very well. (*Emma* 48)

Unlike Emma, Knightley separates himself from the equation of a possible Robert-Harriet union. Thus when Robert asks for advice, Knightley speaks his opinion but regulates himself enough to trust his friend's sense and wish him well. In her parallel

position of giving advice, Emma readily delivers her verdict, but lacks the necessary trust in friendship to see what would make Harriet contented.

Although Emma's friendship with Harriet Smith spells disaster for Harriet, Elton, and potentially Knightley, Mr. Woodhouse, ever blind to the goings-on of the community when he is not directly involved, sees no danger or impracticality. Knightley, on the other hand, firmly and correctly believes that the intimacy between Emma and Harriet is "'a bad thing . . . I think they will neither of them do the other any good'" (*Emma* 28). He articulates his reasons for opposing the friendship, displaying greater wisdom than any other person in the novel: "How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority? And as for Harriet, I will venture to say that *she* cannot gain by the acquaintance. Hartfield will only put her out of conceit with all the other places she belongs to" (*Emma* 30).

Harriet's easily persuaded heart and her subsequently thoughtless rejection of Mr. Martin proves Mr. Knightley's prediction correct. The entire friendship between Emma and Harriet too closely resembles that of an owner and pet that truly, no good can come to Harriet. Her sweetness and innocence, though they maintain Mr. Martin's affections even after the first rejection, still suffer repeatedly under Emma's insensitive handling. And when Harriet does the unthinkable, becoming a rival for Mr. Knightley's love, Emma's good intentions come to a halt. But as always, Emma triumphs and survives her day of uncertainty unscathed, while Harriet's wounds, despite happily marrying Mr. Martin, will in all likelihood remain with her always.

CHAPTER FOUR

Marriage: Seeking an Ideal Husband

Marriage is certainly an important component of each of Austen's novels, but the heroines' identities are not shaped nor determined by the sole act itself. In fact each formation of identity must precede even the possibility of marriage because of the nature of a social contract. Therefore marriage occurs only after the heroine develops a strong sense of self as a contributing partner. Moreover, the act of marriage further demonstrates the influence from father to daughter; the daughter's attitude toward potential suitors and her ultimate selection reflect a father's indirect impact. Each love story is but one of many elements that together uncover and construct a multi-faceted heroine, for just as the relationship between father and daughter permeates day-to-day behavior, so does the influence carry over into the realm of marriage.

For both Elizabeth and Emma, their family situations put them at a disadvantage when it comes to prospective marriage. Elizabeth has neither a substantial dowry nor any social claims to offer a future husband; in fact, her connections are so bad that they threaten to counteract any of the good from her own personal charms. Emma, on the other hand, possesses the rank and mark of good breeding any husband would seek, but it is her father and her limited self-knowledge that hold prevent her from making independent romantic relationships. Unhappily for would-be suitors, Mr. Woodhouse has such a strong claim upon Emma that from the outset, she declares that she has no inducement to marry, for "'never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and

important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's'" (*Emma* 66-7).

Emma's sense of obligation to her father governs nearly all of her decisions. In contrast, Mr. Bennet's private nature frees Elizabeth from the kind of loyalty conflicts that Emma faces, yet he nevertheless has a hand in shaping her outlook and approach to marriage. Though there may not be a direct tie that connects Mr. Bennet to Mr. Darcy, or Mr. Woodhouse to Mr. Knightley, there are ways in which the daughters' ideals and objectives regarding marriage derive from their relationship with their fathers. Thus, one can identify traces of the father in how the daughter selects her husband.

Dr. John Gregory prioritized happiness over practicality for his own daughters' futures. This is not to say that he advised his daughters to be reckless and *im*practical, but in his thoughts on love and marriage, he offers a startlingly frank opinion concerning women's expectations for married life:

> I know nothing that renders a woman more despicable, than her thinking it essential to her happiness to be married. Besides the gross indelicacy of the sentiment, it is a false one, as thousands of women have experienced it; but if it were true, the belief that it is so, and the consequent impatience to be married, is the most effectual way to prevent it. (Gregory 62-3)

Like many of his contemporaries, Gregory shows a willingness to take a back-seat to his children's marital arrangements (Stone 289), but the emotion in his warning displays his earnest desire for his daughters to comprehend the seriousness of marriage. He does not disparage the institution, but rather addresses one's attitude about it, impressing the option of remaining single rather than marrying for lesser motivations such as mercenary

gain. By his estimation, women ought not to think that marriage will be their happiness and to think it essential for their completion. Such an attitude instead promises to prove itself faulty and even improper.

Although Austen's father creations do not demonstrate the kind of loving foresight that Dr. Gregory exemplifies in his *Legacy*, Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Bennet are nonetheless loving fathers in their own ways. There exists between Elizabeth and her father a peculiar sort of intimacy that is quite easy to overlook and under appreciate. Indeed, one must search for the hidden tenderness in order to find it, buried beneath Mr. Bennet's easy sarcasm and wry detachment. In Elizabeth, perhaps he has the equal he had hoped to find in his own wife, but the reality of inevitable separation must put a certain distance between them.

The complexity of Austen's writing, therefore, is that while she presents the negative aspects of her fathers' characters, critics and readers must be wary of believing that they are wholly bad, for that kind of early prejudice is in fact the very mistake Elizabeth Bennet makes with Mr. Darcy. While critics have an easy task in exposing Mr. Bennet's flaws as a husband and father, a full assessment of his character must include a discussion of his positive qualities as well. In his relationship with Elizabeth, his wryness represents only the outer packaging of his actual tenderness for her. His softer side may rarely surface, but his affection for his daughter comes from his appreciation for her mind and spirit.

Allowing for Mr. Bennet's hidden fondness does not exclude the possibility that he is, in practice, a distant parent; in Austen's world the two circumstances can co-exist. And ironically, a better understanding of Mr. Bennet's feeling toward Elizabeth and his

benevolent intentions toward her can be found in the Mr. Collins scene. Mr. Collins's unsolicited proposal of marriage to Elizabeth, and her parents' polar reactions, uncovers a significant fact about Mr. Bennet; despite how removed he may seem from the rest of his family, he does care about what happens to Elizabeth. Such partiality at first provokes a disturbance that he does not care about his other daughters, but nonetheless, the reader must accept that at least he loves Elizabeth.

Nothing about the showdown of the parents should surprise the reader. Mr. Bennet would not be Mr. Bennet if he agreed with his wife in forcing Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, and he certainly wouldn't be within character if he were solemn in *any* matter that would concern Mr. Collins. The only person who suffers shock is Mrs. Bennet, for until this moment she has not realized how seriously divided she and her husband stand when it comes to marriage. Their respective proclamations reveal their true colors unmistakably; Mrs. Bennet, who has never concerned herself with Elizabeth's personal happiness, wants only to secure Mr. Collins because he is a potential husband and the heir to the family estate. Mr. Bennet, who does care about Elizabeth, refuses to give his consent to the union, even at the expense of losing the preservation of the line intact. What is more, one would naturally, and rightly, suspect that Mr. Bennet would never force Elizabeth to do anything she disliked. He trusts Elizabeth as he would trust himself; therefore if she decides she cannot marry Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet is more than ready to stand up for her.

From the beginning, Mr. Bennet's preference for a quick mind reinforces Elizabeth's positive self-assessment. Considering that the partiality comes from so hard and cynical a man as her father only increases the importance of Elizabeth's

independence. She and her father get along in part because they are so similar. Mr. Bennet's dislike for frivolity automatically sets him somewhat against his wife and younger daughters, while Jane's blind sweetness and Mary's austerity alienate themselves from him. Elizabeth maintains the strongest mind of her own characterized by sense, amicability, independence, and a carefree disposition. It is this same mind that likewise scorns the superciliousness of Mr. Bingley's sisters.

Mr. Collins's appreciation for Elizabeth's personality, quite differently rooted than Mr. Bennet's, predictably sets himself up for rejection: "your wit and vivacity I think must be acceptable to [Lady Catherine de Bourgh], especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite" (*Pride* 147-8). It is so clear that Mr. Collins sees himself as Elizabeth's patron, offering rank, fortune, and respectability. Strangely, he says nothing of Elizabeth's "wit and vivacity" in relation to his own desires, which only calls attention to his ingratiating nature that cannot separate himself from his beloved patroness. Furthermore, by commenting on the tempering effect of Lady Catherine, he unwittingly reveals how ill-matched he and Elizabeth would be. To think that rank would silence Elizabeth into sharing Mr. Collins's awe only shows that he does not know the first thing about Elizabeth. She, who despises the Bingley sisters, could only loathe the company of Lady Catherine, whose condescension and imposition offends so much more than any other character of rank in the novel.

But despite his arrogance, Mr. Collins hits upon a harsh truth: "in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications" (*Pride* 150). But in light of her

father's lack of direction for Elizabeth's future—not out of indifference but out of confidence that her personality will win her favor—Elizabeth does not take his warning to heart.

To Mr. Bennet's credit, he manages to instill in Elizabeth a value for herself that exceeds concern for rank. Her learned respect for reason and intellect make it impossible for her to accept a proposal from a man who does not also value it in her. Thus, when she and her friend Charlotte Lucas debate their ideals concerning marriage, it is such a grave shock to hear Charlotte's dispassionate opinion that "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (*Pride* 70).

When Mrs. Bennet tries to rally her husband's support for the Collins proposal, his "calm unconcern" suffers no change when he learns about the rejection; "'And what am I to do on the occasion? – It seems an hopeless business'" (*Pride* 152). He is perfectly satisfied with Elizabeth's handling of the situation because he trusts her so unquestioningly. The enjoyment of dashing his wife's hopes is only a side-benefit to the main objective of making sure Elizabeth understands he would never want her to marry someone he so little respects as Mr. Collins.

Though Elizabeth goes on even to reject Darcy's more lucrative, but equally offensive first proposal, once Lydia Bennet runs away with Wickham, casting the taint of scandal onto her entire family, Elizabeth is more sensible than ever of Mr. Collins's warning that other offers may not be made to her. She has already rejected two suitors, and rightly so, but with the fall of the family comes the realization that she may not have many more opportunities for matrimony.

Witnessing the disempowerment of her father by Lydia's disgraceful actions, Elizabeth tries to comfort him and ease his distress, but he coolly replies: "'No, Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough'" (*Pride* 314). For once, Mr. Bennet feels the effects of his nonchalant parenting. Yet even when he is forced into a painful acknowledgement of his fault, he remains ever philosophical, quipping that the guilt is only momentary. Despite the pain of the situation, he retains his sense of humor. In a strange way, he thus teaches Elizabeth about handling misfortune. Contrasted to his wife, Mr. Bennet always keeps his composure, feeling the blame but not wallowing in it. Although he has been negligent, Mrs. Bennet's self-victimization does not present an attractive alternative. Mr. Bennet, of course, comments with his usual sarcasm: "'This is a parade . . . which does one good; it gives such an elegance to misfortune! Another day I will do the same; I will sit in my library, in my night cap and powdering gown, and give as much trouble as I can'" (*Pride* 315).

Susan Fraiman writes of Mr. Bennet's brief confrontation with his weaknesses as the turning point in Elizabeth's relationship with him:

> The Lydia-Wickham imbroglio creates, for one thing, a situation before which Mr. Bennet will prove inadequate, Mr. Darcy heroic. Elizabeth first doubts her father regarding his decision to let Lydia go to Brighton, and she blames her father bitterly for the subsequent scandal. For Mr. Darcy, by contrast, the calamity is a chance to prove his nobility both of heart and of purse, his desire to rectify and his power to do so. The Lydia plot

> therefore accomplishes Elizabeth's separation from her father and her reattachment to another. (Fraiman 178-9)

Fraiman is only partially correct in her summation and commentary; Darcy certainly takes the situation and turns tragedy into an unexpectedly generous gesture. But Elizabeth does not blame her father "bitterly"—she primarily blames Lydia. Another complication with Fraiman's discussion is that she oversimplifies the transition in Elizabeth's heart. Rather than separating from her father in order to attach to Mr. Darcy, the change in her attitude cannot be so quickly and easily interpreted. Elizabeth's ideas are more complex than Fraiman discusses, for she constantly learns from her father's example both how to act herself (which aspects to retain, as well as which to discard) and what she seeks in a partner. When Elizabeth re-contemplates Darcy's offer she goes through an exploratory analysis that may have her redirect her attention toward another man as an ideal:

> She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (*Pride* 325)

When Elizabeth and Darcy finally acknowledge their flaws and their indebtedness to each other for revealing them, marriage is at last possible. Elizabeth understands how wrongly she had estimated Wickham and Darcy, observing Darcy's softened manner with her own

eyes. In marrying Darcy, she does not abandon her roots, but shapes them into a more tolerable sort of manner—one that she can utilize as her strongest asset in her marriage.

Austen's ideas of marriage as expressed in *Emma* are intriguing but different from those in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth's relatively low place in society should seem a disadvantage to Darcy, yet Emma's privileged family, which would solve Elizabeth's dilemma, cannot rectify her own barriers to marriage. To the public, Mr. Woodhouse and Emma hold positions of high respect, but even an estranged neighbor like Mrs. Elton can penetrate through the outward prestige to the core environment of the home: "I perfectly understand your situation . . . (looking towards Mr Woodhouse)—Your father's state of health must be a great drawback . . . [a trip to Bath] could not fail of being of use to Mr Woodhouse's spirits, which, I understand, are sometimes much depressed" (*Emma* 207). Mr. Woodhouse may be a kind and well-liked man, but his fussiness is indeed a drawback to his young daughter, as Mrs. Elton so easily observes.

However, Emma visualizes her father as a perfect companion with respect to loving her so completely and her being "always first and always right" with him (*Emma* 67). With coming first with people and being needed by them as Emma's measurements for love, it is not surprising that she sees no need for marriage. Yet when Harriet believes Mr. Knightley's affection is within her lowly reach, Emma finds herself admitting that *she* wants Knightley's love. Her fear of being supplanted awakens her from her own delusions about love; like Mr. Woodhouse's fears of being neglected, Emma fears falling out of favor with those she knows and trusts. Mr. Knightley has always been a mentor to Emma—particularly when Emma errs in injuring others, like Miss Bates—which proves that he is, in fact a better guide than her father. Whereas Mr. Woodhouse's weaknesses

teach Emma strength and self-reliance, she also learns that she must find someone who can take care of her for a change—not in the same way that her father needs care, but in the ways that her father did not correct or guide her. She is bound to be with someone who can discipline and love her in an edifying, not stunting, way.

Thus, the significance of Mr. Woodhouse in the novel as a whole, and in his daughter's life in particular, infuses a quiet but incredibly forceful dynamic to her interaction with everyone around her. By studying Emma's on-going relationship with Mr. Knightley, the reader may detect noteworthy indications of Mr. Woodhouse's impact upon her attitude toward marriage and the process of her identify formation.

Emma does not resent her singlehood: on the contrary, it is important to note how she embraces it. Were it not for her match-making, the wish for romance may otherwise be undetectable. But her desire to see others marry, when one might otherwise expect her to wish her friends to remain single and, along with her father, lament their loss of company, shows that Emma acknowledges the inclination of people to pair off. She sees marriage as positive and actively schemes to secure husbands for her friends. In her mind, money may be the factor that allows her to scoff at the idea of marriage for herself, but in truth, Emma does not yet know that she too desires romantic companionship and that she has always cared for Knightley more than she admits.

Knightley's attempts to correct Emma do not really succeed until the Box Hill incident, where Emma rudely and unthinkingly slights the chattiness of her old family friend, Miss Bates. Though Emma would just as soon forget the debacle, Mr. Knightley rebukes her soundly and passionately. Painful as it is for Emma and the reader to endure Mr. Knightley's disappointment in her, one remembers that "[o]nly after immaturity,

selfishness, and excessive self-confidence have produced error, trouble, and real suffering, can the adult begin to teach himself or herself the habits of criticism and self-control which should have been inculcated in childhood" (Nardin 83). Knightley can call attention to Emma's mistake, but it is Emma who must decide to correct herself. Because she knows how unjustly she hurt Miss Bates, Emma cannot deny her wrongdoing. Mr. Knightley does service to her in pointing out the blunder, but it is Emma who decides to act upon her guilt.

That Mr. Knightley alone chastises Emma points to the question of why Mr. Woodhouse does not. In fact, Mr. Woodhouse's blindness to his own daughter's character and action creates great embarrassment when Emma returns from paying Miss Bates an apologetic visit only to hear her father praise her unjustly to the one man who knows better: "'Dear Emma has been to call on Mrs and Miss Bates, Mr Knightley, as I told you before. She is always so attentive to them'" (*Emma* 291). Emma's understanding of herself, spurred by Mr. Knightley's boldness, gives her new insight into the nature of love; long accustomed to pleasing and being pleased, Emma learns from Mr. Knightley the difference between his mentoring kind of love and her father's possessive love. No one questions the affectionate attachment between Mr. Woodhouse and Emma, but once Emma recognizes the value and necessity of self-correction, she must see that her father's love is not enough and that Knightley is the one who prompts her to grow. Though she does not blame her father for the way he raised her, the reader begins to question the terms of his contentment and the cost it exacts from others.

Mr. Woodhouse's difficulty in accepting marriage worsens as the women in his life leave him. Because his eldest daughter's marriage to Mr. John Knightley takes her

away from Highbury, Mr. Woodhouse constantly complains about her distance from home. Thus Emma, in contrast to her sister, would like to remain with her father. However, her resolve against marriage has always had one exception: "'Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! . . . without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine'" (*Emma* 66-67). Therefore, when she unexpectedly feels love for Mr. Knightley, a re-evaluating her situation is in order. In contemplating her revelation and searching for its beginning, Emma at last concedes that, at least in comparison to Frank Churchill, the only other man she had considered for romance, "there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr. Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear" (*Emma* 312). Further reflection leads Emma to the most profound knowledge of all—that she "had never known how much of her happiness depended on being *first* with Mr Knightley, first in interest and affection" (*Emma* 313).

When Knightley proposes to Emma, he acknowledges her responsiveness to him and praises her, for "I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it" (*Emma* 325). Her education by him earns his favor despite having first incited his rebukes, for in trusting his wisdom, like Harriet Smith to Robert Martin, she too proves that "in good hands . . . [she] might be easily led aright" (*Emma* 48). She may have believed she could resist the idea of marriage, but receiving Mr. Knightley's full attention and securing his love puts her in an entirely new state of emotion: "she was now in an exquisite flutter of happiness—and such happiness, moreover, as she believed must still be greater when the flutter should have passed away" (*Emma* 328).

Knightley's role of mentor reaches its height in his instilling within Emma the ability to properly value relationships. In fact, so heavily does she weigh her responsibilities that she still feels she cannot leave her father and that an engagement will have to suffice while he still lives. (*Emma* 328). Mr. Knightley's wisdom then does him the greatest credit in his proposed solution to Emma's long-standing dilemma; he offers to leave his own estate and move into the Woodhouse home. As an old family friend, Knightley knows as much as Emma does that Mr. Woodhouse will always need someone to see to his needs and that the role has fallen indefinitely onto Emma's shoulders. But sadly, Mr. Woodhouse refuses to consent to the marriage, even though he has no reasonable objection. He tries at first to remind her of her former vows never to marry, and then speaks of the marriage only as a very distant event. He doesn't become angry, possessive, or irrational, which means Emma cannot counter him or make accusations. Instead, he does what he always does—he plays the helpless victim. Final consent must come at the cost of Mr. Woodhouse relinquishing his role as the provider, for although he has not demonstrated an ability or inclination to support Emma beyond financial stability, he still must give his assent in order for Emma to progress beyond her limited sphere.

Once Emma realizes the value of Knightley's companionship for herself, the only thing to stand in the way is her father's stubbornness. Therefore inasmuch as Mr. Knightley marries Emma, he essentially knows he must incorporate Mr. Woodhouse into the marriage contract as well. He is correct; no other man could enter Hartfield but Mr. Knightley, for Mr. Woodhouse has already developed an inadvertent dependence upon him—one that Mr. Woodhouse recognizes when a string of turkey thefts frighten him into approving the arrangement, for then he senses Knightley's ability to protect his

home. The great sacrifice Mr. Knightley makes in moving into Hartfield with father and daughter proves he is the right, and only, man for Emma.

Conclusion

As Jane Austen's heroines observe and interact with their fathers, they become increasingly aware of what they want for themselves. Mr. Bennet creates an atmosphere that encourages Elizabeth to think for herself, while Mr. Woodhouse's encouragement that Emma remains single affords her the considerable freedom to form an identity without the aim of attracting a husband, but for the purpose of finding her own self. Elizabeth, who has always had a strong sense of who she is, experiences a growing appreciation for who Mr. Darcy really is, while Emma must first learn to appreciate relationships outside of the perspective of her father's self-centered nature of love before seeing the love she has always had for Mr. Knightley.

The role of "Daddy's little girl," comfortable and familiar to both Elizabeth and Emma, is limiting once they grow up. For the label itself ties the daughter inextricably to the father. Yet these fictional relationships are more progressive than the early seventeenth century families of which Stone reports. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse do not expect their daughters to marry for the good of the family, but neither do they exercise the progressive rationalism of the late eighteenth century. Austen writes them as transitional fathers who raise their daughters liberally, ones that guide them out of the confines of conservatism toward the domain of choice and independence.

Even today, our expectations of fathers outside the scope of financial provision are comparably uncertain because we continue to associate the primary role of caretaker with mothers. There are few Dr. John Gregorys, from his own time and in the present, to pleasantly surprise their daughters with insights and expressed concerns for their

happiness. But whether fathers assume an active role in their daughters' lives or a distant one, and with or without their awareness of their own example, daughters learn from them. So it is that when Austen's heroines find husbands, in part they reach their self-awareness and development because they have pushed against the negative qualities of their fathers, and also because they have re-created images they seek in an ideal father in their discovery of an ideal husband.

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