

Like Mother Like Daughter: Infatuation, Misery, and the Bennet Legacy

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In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Lydia and George Wickham are a clear warning against the dangers of marriage built on infatuation. Because of Lydia's lack of proper education, authority, and guidance, she is doomed to make the same mistakes as her parents made. Mr. Bennet is a neglectful father, leaving the education of his daughters to their own devices, and Mrs. Bennet is a frivolous and careless woman, much like Lydia. Both marriages represent a cycle of infatuation that leads to misery and financial distress.

Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet's miserable marriage affects the entire family dynamic, influencing their children's decisions. Mr. Bennet is an intellectual yet absent father. His favorite daughter is Elizabeth because of her ability to engage in thoughtful conversation with him and her "quickness"¹ of mind. His wife, Mrs. Bennet, is repeatedly made out to be a thoughtless and insipid woman, one that he makes fun of frequently. In the first chapter of the book, when Mr. Bennet refuses Mrs. Bennet's request to greet Mr. Bingley, she complains, saying "You have no compassion for my poor nerves." In response, Mr. Bennet says, "You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."² He is sarcastically making fun of her, mocking her hypochondriacal language. When talking to Elizabeth, he says, "my child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life."³ He hopes that the daughter most similar to him will not make the same mistake he did.

¹ pg.7

² pg.7

³ pg.356

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are fundamentally incompatible. Austen states that “Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character...She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.”⁴ He likely married Mrs. Bennet for her youthful beauty, mistaking physical attraction for compatibility. Over time, he realized that she is foolish and embarrassing, leading him to withdraw emotionally and mock her instead of engaging with the family. Elizabeth describes her family dynamic as “deranged”, due to “a father absent [and a] mother incapable of exertion, and requiring constant attendance.”⁵ Lydia is not interested in intellectual pursuits, with most of her conversations in the novel revolving around gossip and social activities. In these circumstances, Lydia grew up mostly under the influence of her mother, a woman as immature as she. Her every wish has been indulged, not entirely out of a desire to spoil her, but also out of a lack of caring authority in her household. Lydia and her mother share similar personalities and interests, and both delight when the red-coats arrive in Meryton. Mrs. Bennet early in the book remarks that she had once loved a red-coat and still does in her heart, and Lydia is so distraught after the infantry leave Meryton that she follows them to Brighton, where she elopes with Wickham. After Lydia leaves, leaving her family in shambles, her sister Elizabeth comments, “[Lydia] has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and...has given up to nothing but amusement and vanity...Since the —shire were first quartered in Meryton, nothing but love, flirtation, and officers have been in her head.”⁶

Lydia has been told since childhood that her and her sisters’ primary goal is to get married, something her mother emphasizes throughout the book. She is proud of having gotten a husband the way she has, even exclaiming that she wishes her sisters had “half of [her] good luck,” and that they must all go to Brighton as she did, for “that is the place to get husbands.”⁷ Mrs. Bennet is overjoyed at her daughter’s marriage. When Mr. Bennet withholds funds from his daughter because of his anger, she

⁴ pg.7

⁵ pg.266

⁶ pg.269

⁷ pg.300

“could hardly comprehend it.”⁸ Mr. Bennet is extremely displeased when Lydia returns, and reflects on his past failures, wishing “that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of his children...He now wished it more than ever. Had he done his duty in that respect, Lydia need not have been indebted to her uncle.”⁹ He does not, however, set up this system and quickly forgets about his desire to do right by his children and wife. He is irresponsible, something reflected in the way he treats his children.

Lydia is drawn to her husband Wickham’s charm and the attention he gives her, much like how her mother was likely drawn to Mr. Bennet’s wit, status, and good looks. Elizabeth comments that “Wickham has every charm of person and address that can captivate a woman.”¹⁰ When faced with a man as charming and handsome as Wickham, it is not surprising that she quickly became infatuated with him to the point of elopement. Her father is well aware of her thoughtless nature, and when Elizabeth attempts to warn him of the danger that allowing Lydia to go to Brighton poses, he says, “Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense or inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances.” By allowing his teenage daughter to knowingly summer in a place overrun by infantrymen, he allows Lydia’s elopement to occur. He is the foremost authority in his family, yet forsakes his duty in protecting his daughter.

Lydia is too immature to realize that Wickham is self-serving, and her marriage quickly becomes a transactional arrangement rather than a romantic one. By eloping, the only way that Lydia can be a distinguished member of society again is by marrying Wickham. If she is left unmarried after running away with a man and without a chaperone, she will be ruined. Lydia’s family acknowledges that her elopement is due to her immaturity. When Elizabeth reads the letter detailing what Lydia had done, she exclaims, “Oh! Thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia!”¹¹ If Wickham does not marry Lydia, he will not face the

⁸ pg.294

⁹ pg.292

¹⁰ pg.269

¹¹ pg.277

same consequences as she will. His reputation as a rake might worsen, but this pales in comparison to what Lydia will experience. Lydia and her sisters, if this were to pass, may never find husbands. They would also lose any respect they held previously in society. At the end of the book, they are essentially impoverished gentry. They lack the ability to manage their finances correctly, and waste away the £1000 that Mr. Darcy gives Wickham upon his marriage. Wickham is also a gambler and a spendthrift, something that only will only worsen their dire situation. Lydia is forced to rely on her sisters' kindness to continue her lifestyle. In her letter to Elizabeth, she requests funds and a place at court for her husband, and makes clear that she and her husband require aid to continue their lifestyle. Their marriage ends in financial hardship.

Wickham loses interest in Lydia as soon as they are married, mirroring how Mr. Bennet becomes disillusioned. Their relationship was not built on mutual respect and admiration, like Darcy and Elizabeth's, but something more carnal and temporary. Mr. Bennet's marriage is also built on temporary infatuation, and neither marriage ends up happy. Austen states that "they were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; her's lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her."¹² Lydia becomes an image of her mother—stuck in an unhappy marriage with a partner who does not respect her, and engaging only in frivolous pursuits. The nature of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's marriage and Lydia and Wickham's marriage is cyclical. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet indirectly and directly cause Lydia and Wickham to be married, and condemn them to the same fate they have. Mr. Bennet makes snide comments about Wickham being his "favorite,"¹³ perhaps because he sees a reflection of his own marriage in Lydia and Wickham's. This echoes a larger point that Austen attempts to make—that without better education and guidance, women will continue making the same mistakes as their predecessors. If Lydia had been taught better to the contrary, she might not have eloped with Wickham and would have saved herself a life of economic

¹² 366

¹³pg.378

burden and misery. Lydia and Wickham's marriage is ultimately a reflection of Mr. and Mrs. Bennets' marriage, and would likely not have occurred without the faults of both parents. The two marriages represent a cycle of infatuation and misery, and makes clear the dangers of marriage only because of attraction.