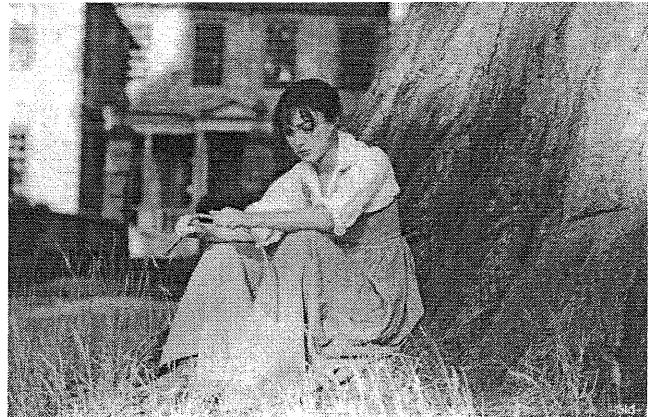


THE WILDNESS IN JANE AUSTEN'S ELIZABETH BENNET

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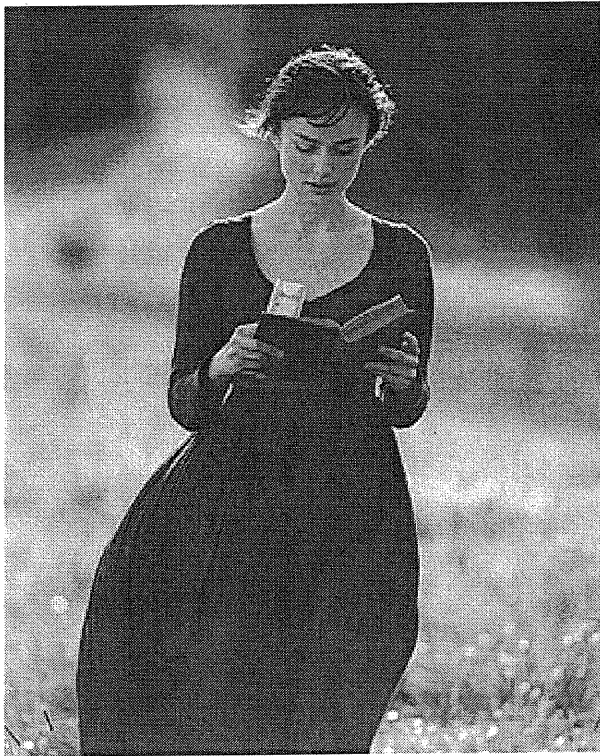
"She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried; "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself." - Elizabeth Bennet, (Pride and Prejudice, 2005, Chapter 36)

Elizabeth Bennet is the perfect example of a strong female character. Eliza Bennet is considered one of the most prominent women of early feminist literature. Elizabeth is witty, intelligent, wild, independent, but it is her ability to admit that she is wrong and grow from that experience that makes her a strong female character in literature.

Some see Jane Austen's literature as promoting the idea that women are only complete when they acquire a good husband. For example, "like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Jane Eyre, Clara Middleton and even Dorothea Brooke triumphantly re-solve the conflicts of both plot and life by finding the right man and marrying him. Or, like the tragic Clarissa, they may die. And for a twentieth-century feminist, to be restricted to the alternatives of marriage or of death is to be restricted indeed" (Yeazell, 1974, 33). There are many writers that critique Austen's work for being anti-feminist because with every novel the plot is resolved with the

female protagonist's marriage. However, there are some feminist writers that have a different view on Austen's intentions. Yeazell believes that in Austen's novel *Emma*, the marriage of Emma and George Knightly means much more. "When Emma Woodhouse at last weds George Knightly, her marriage is a sign that she has finally transcended her own egotism, that she is able genuinely to connect with the larger world beyond herself" (Yeazell, 1974, 37). The same can



be said of Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth is quick tempered, judgmental, but good hearted. Elizabeth cannot stand Mr. Darcy because he does not stand up to her expectations and she quickly judges him before attempting to get to know him. She does the same with Mr. Wickham, Caroline Bingley, George Bingley and many others in the novel. She realizes her own prejudices, faults and haughty manner at the same time that she realizes that she has completely misjudged Mr. Darcy. It is only after she gets over her faults and gets to know Mr. Darcy does she fall in love with him. Essentially, this novel does not end with

Elizabeth finding her 'happy ending' by getting married, but it ends with her growing as a person.

The reader is presented with positive ideas of education for women while reading Jane Austen's books. Elizabeth is very smart and witty. She is an avid reader and ready for any adventures or witty battles. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth and her sisters are viewed with disdain by many members of 'high' society. Elizabeth and her sisters education is viewed as lesser because they did not have a governess or travel to London for their education. Miss Bingley in chapter eight describes an accomplished woman,

"no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a

certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.'

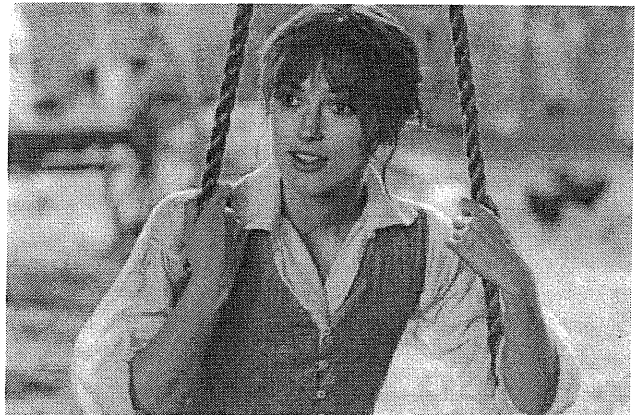
'All this she must possess,' added Darcy, 'and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.'

'I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*.'

'Are you so severe upon your own sex, as to doubt the possibility of all this?'

'I never saw such a woman, I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united.' (*Pride and Prejudice*, 2005, Chapter 8)."

Elizabeth seems to have a more realistic view of women and education. In this exchange Elizabeth indeed shows her wit and intelligence as well as her fearless attitude to speech her mind, which is very accomplished. It is her quickness of wit that is greatly valued by her father and it attracts Mr. Darcy to her.



Elizabeth Bennet is called wild throughout the novel. Many members of society view her in distain because of her wildness of manner. Her family and acquaintances view her as wild because she is frank in her opinions, speaks her mind, dress how she pleases, and frequently walks the country side on her own accord. Her mother, Mrs. Bennet, believes that she runs around her house and country side. For example, in chapter nine when Elizabeth is discussing her opinions on the matter of character with Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet appallingly states, "'Lizzy," cried her mother, "remember where you are, and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home.'" For when Elizabeth openly discusses her opinions in a manner that would be acceptable for any man, she is considered to be wild. This wildness is considered a great virtue by the early feminists like Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Mary Wollstonecraft believes that this kind of 'wildness' indicates a healthy and independent mind. This belief that women with wit and intellect like Eliza are what those that have been persecuting women believe, those that support the former beliefs would propagate and spread (Brown, 1973, 332).

Her wildness is seen as an important character strength by Wollstonecraft as well as by characters within the novel. Darcy is attracted by this wildness and Mr. Bingley likes her very well because of her personality. Her father loves and encourages her behaviour because it is a part of who she is. Elizabeth can take care of herself and her wildness is indeed her independent spirit. Elizabeth is envied and ridiculed by Bingley's sisters,

Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise.

She was shown into the breakfast-parlour, where all but Jane were assembled, and where her appearance created a great deal of surprise. That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley; and Elizabeth was convinced that they held her in contempt for it....

She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild.

She did, indeed, Louisa. I could hardly keep my countenance. Very nonsensical to come at all! Why must SHE be scampering about the country, because her sister had a cold? Her hair, so untidy, so blowsy! (Pride and Prejudice, 2005, Chapter 7 & 8).

The Bingley sisters are offended by her behaviour, but this passage shows their envy rather than strictly just disdain. Elizabeth's wild nature is an independence that others are envious of and it attracts others to her. She does not do this on purpose, it is just her personality. Elizabeth is guided by her own thoughts and beliefs, not by what society says she should do. The Bingley sisters perplexity once again can be used as an example, "*To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum*" (Pride and Prejudice, 2005, Chapter 8). Once again

one can see that the sisters comments are motivated by envy masked by disgust and concern for decorum. This is what Jane Austen's Lizzy represents, an independent, witty and strong female.

Elizabeth Bennet has her faults, but that is what makes her represent a real and true person. Elizabeth is not a static delicate female character, but a wild, witty and intelligent young woman. However, these are not the most important reason why Elizabeth Bennet makes a string female character in literature, but it is her ability to realize her faults and grow as a person that makes her strong.

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