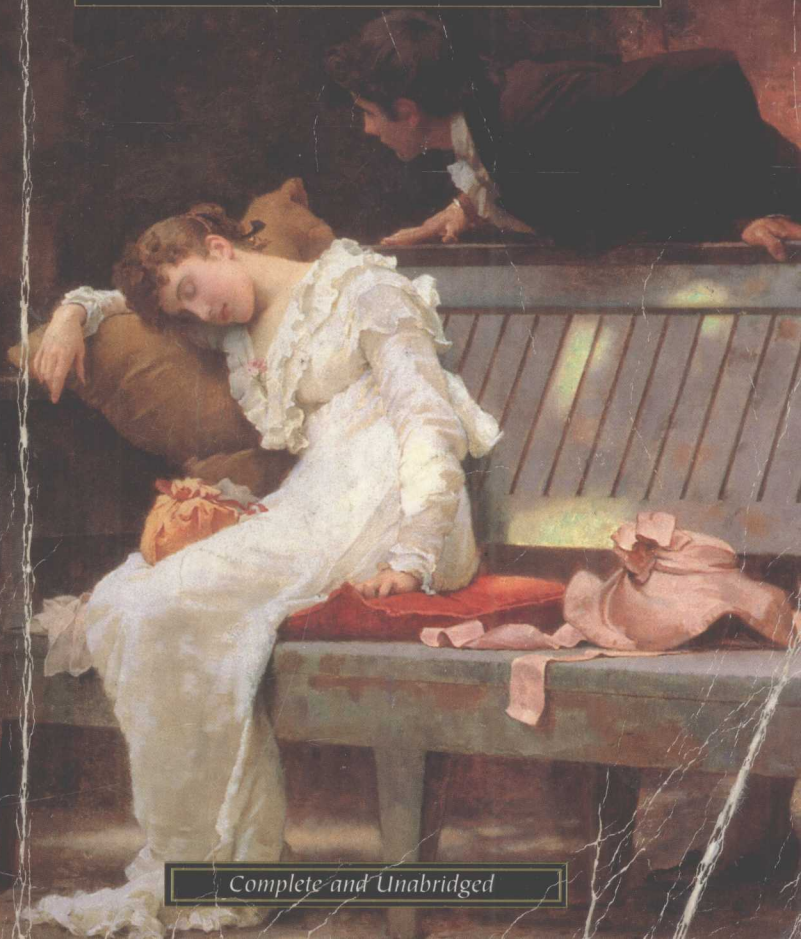


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

JANE AUSTEN

*Pride and
Prejudice*



Complete and Unabridged

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Jane Austen



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

Pride and Prejudice has always been Jane Austen's best-loved novel, not only, it seems, by its readers but also by Austen herself. 'My own darling child', she called it in a letter to her sister Cassandra, and later expressed fears that *Mansfield Park* would appear 'not half so entertaining' and *Emma* 'inferior in wit'. Correctly anticipating her readers' 'delight' in the 'playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style', Austen also indulged herself in an only partially hyperbolic declaration of love for her heroine Elizabeth Bennet:

I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know.

Austen's fears were, of course, groundless; Elizabeth's popularity with readers has never been in question any more than Mr Darcy's status as one of the classically desirable men of literature.

What features of *Pride and Prejudice* have given it this special status among Austen's novels? Its wit and irony, its meticulous dissection of individual characters within a minutely observed social framework, are obvious strengths but are also features common to all Austen's work. Rather, I think, it is the novel's particular quality of offering *satisfaction* to its readers which accounts for its enduring popularity. *Pride and Prejudice* is a comedy, and as such its closure resolves difficulties, brings harmony out of discord, and sends its protagonists forward into an assured future which has been earned through growth in self-knowledge. But in this case the satisfactory nature of the ending goes significantly beyond the demands of comic convention, and gratifies the reader's tastes in a way not found in Austen's other novels.

In the first chapter, Mrs Bennet's effusions over the arrival of Bingley at Netherfield – 'A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!' – have already been ironically

anatomised as foolishness by the novel's opening sentence. It is a truth by no means universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. The novel's plot, however, seems to support Mrs Bennet's aspirational sentiments. It is not merely that the good end happily and the bad – comparatively – unhappily; more, that they do so in ways which comfortably indulge the reader's fantasy-feelings of proper reward. Bingley's four or five thousand a year is a fitting prize for Jane's sweetly passive goodness; Darcy's ten thousand a year and magnificent Pemberley estate provide a material match for Elizabeth's superiority in wit and insight; and Lydia and Wickham, consigned to a life of nomadic penury, are suitably punished for their licence. The three marriages which end the novel are carefully ranked in an ascending scale of desert and financial reward. And the minor characters are similarly disposed of according to merit. Austen contrives a scene which gives Elizabeth legitimate opportunity to deliver some richly deserved home-truths to Lady Catherine; the Collinses are forced to flee their home to escape the de Bourgh wrath; Miss Bingley, 'very deeply mortified' by Darcy's marriage, has her haughty nose put thoroughly out of joint; and Mrs Bennet, it is implied, is not permitted to visit at Pemberley.

Perhaps it is in part this indulging of the reader's sense of merit and appropriateness, rather than challenging it (as in *Sense and Sensibility* or *Emma*, for example), that led Austen herself to describe *Pride and Prejudice* as 'rather too light, and bright, and sparkling'. In the same letter she goes on to suggest, semi-ironically, what may be lacking:

... it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté ...

Of course Austen – unlike some of her later critics – is not serious about the desirability of highlighting the novel's Napoleonic background; and in fact *Pride and Prejudice* is comically rich in 'solemn specious nonsense', though the examples which pour with tedious loquacity from Mr Collins, or with stale predictability from Mary Bennet, are not unconnected with the story but carefully integrated into its thematic development. The perception that the novel 'wants shade', however, is perhaps more significant. Certainly for her next novel, *Mansfield Park*, Austen turned to themes and characters altogether less 'light and bright', and where playfulness and epigrammatism do sparkle – in such characters as Mary Crawford, for example – they are roundly condemned. It may be that the enduring popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* can be accounted

for by the fact that, read on one level, the novel is simply too gratifying, too *easy*.

To be seduced solely by the novel's undoubted surface glitter and satisfying resolution, is, however, to miss the deeper significances of its themes. The title itself, to start with, is interestingly suggestive of investigation into certain abstract moral qualities, and this in turn suggests a deepening and maturing of Austen's initial vision. *Pride and Prejudice*, finally published in 1813, had its genesis in an earlier version called *First Impressions*, probably written in 1796-7. As critics such as Isobel Armstrong have pointed out, the change in title substitutes social, public qualities – 'pride' and 'prejudice' – for the personal and subjective ones suggested by first impressions. And this shift in emphasis from the individualistic to the social, from the private to the public, reflects a wider change in historical perspective over the period of the novel's composition. The 1790s had seen the overturning of the early individualistic radicalism of the French Revolution by the Terrors and the rise of Napoleon and French territorial expansionism. In England, the radical questioning of political certainties – for example, by Godwin and Paine – had been repressed, and despotism at home, together with aggression from France, appeared real threats to the established order. If *Pride and Prejudice* explicitly rejects a treatment of 'the history of Buonaparté', it is nevertheless inevitably set in a context of political uncertainty, of profound anxieties about social order, and of questioning about the relation of the individual to the state.

The terms pride and prejudice, with their neat alliterative structure, suggest an antithesis which is not in fact present. Though 'pride' can have connotations of proper self-respect, it is more usually used pejoratively, as in Johnson's primary definition of 'inordinate and unreasonable self-esteem'. And 'prejudice', while clearly having no potential for positive interpretation, is more likely to be a sub-set of pride than an oppositional quality. The title phrase itself, coupling the two qualities of pride and prejudice, appears in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*, and it seems likely that Austen noted from this its appropriateness to her own work. Interestingly, however, this reveals an important development from her initial conception of 'first impressions', which can readily be subsumed under the heading 'prejudice', but which is not immediately suggestive of the various qualities comprehended in 'pride'. It seems that her youthful version of the final novel was a simpler investigation into the dangers of rapid judgement which matured subsequently into a more complex analysis centred on shifting aspects of pride.

Various critics, most notably perhaps Robert B. Heilman, have traced in detail the usages throughout the novel of the terms 'pride' and

'prejudice'. Of the two, prejudice is certainly the simpler. Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy begins from the moment of his first slighting rejection of her at the ball in Chapter 3, and remains sufficiently fixed to prepare her prejudice in favour of Wickham by the time he appears. Darcy's instant prejudice against the society of Meryton is a predictable consequence of his class and upbringing, and is of sufficient strength to be impervious to the tug of sexual attraction. The opening words of his first proposal to Elizabeth insultingly confirm the depth of his prejudice against her: 'In vain have I struggled . . .' And despite Elizabeth's lacerating self-reproaches after her receipt of Darcy's letter – 'she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd' – the recognition of prejudice, the overturning of first impressions, is of limited thematic potential. The concept flowers into significance at certain key points in the novel, but for long periods remains dormant; the centrality suggested by the title is not really borne out thematically – possibly, as Heilman suggests, because 'Austen saw that there isn't really much to be said about it.'

Pride, by contrast, is an altogether more subtle, shifting and resonant term throughout. Mary Bennet, 'who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections', offers some well-worn reflections on pride early in the novel. And, as so often with her ponderous clichés, the comic solemnity of their offering should not conceal their thematic relevance:

Pride . . . is a very common failing I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it . . .

The novel amply, though more subtly, confirms this. From the moment of Darcy's first appearance, when he is 'discovered to be proud', the whole notion of pride proper or improper, of its absence in either sense, or of its opposite humility, pervades Austen's conception.

Darcy's pride, to start with, is not just a matter of simple snobbery or 'inordinate and unreasonable self-esteem'. When Charlotte Lucas protests early in the novel that Darcy 'has a *right* to be proud', she alerts us to the idea that there exists a proper and necessary pride based on *reasonable* self-esteem. As it happens, neither Darcy nor Elizabeth – both of whom freely confess to pride – can justly claim reasonable self-esteem at this stage of the novel. Indeed it is the painful struggle to overcome improper pride and recognise where esteem of self or others is properly merited that energises the growth to self-knowledge of the two principal characters. This is achieved, moreover, in a context where examples of improper pride, of pride's opposing qualities, humility and mortification, and of damaging lack of pride all abound. Lady Catherine's implacable family pride embarrasses even Darcy, and with neat irony ultimately

provides the plot device which encourages him to renew his proposal to Elizabeth. Bingley's sisters are 'proud and conceited'. Mr Collins's 'humility of manner' in fact conceals 'the self-conceit of a weak head'; and even Bingley on occasion can display an 'appearance of humility' which Darcy rightly exposes as 'an indirect boast'.

In a more oblique manner, Austen also explores the dangers inherent in absence of pride or self-esteem. With the exception of Jane and Elizabeth, the entire Bennet family is woefully lacking in the kind of self-respect which should act as a curb on their various forms of excess or laxity. Mrs Bennet's irredeemable vulgarity and garrulous silliness expose her elder daughters to repeated social ridicule; Mary's pomposity leads her to inappropriate displays of learning or accomplishment; Kitty, and even more Lydia, display a shameless self-advertisement which sends Lydia to the brink of social ruin but leaves not only her but also her mother utterly unrepentant. All display what Darcy's letter describes as a 'total want of propriety' (an accusation Elizabeth acknowledges as 'mortifying, yet merited'), and this want of propriety stems not merely from ignorance of or contempt for accepted social manners, but more importantly from lack of appropriate self-esteem. In failing to display *proper* pride, they humiliate themselves and others.

The case of Mr Bennet is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the one to which Austen pays most attention. While his general failings as a father are those commonly displayed by Austen's parental figures – lack of firmness and control, indolence, neglect of duty – he is a highly unusual character in being allowed not merely to judge with Austen's eyes, but also to speak in her own witty and ironic voice. It is Mr Bennet who interprets Mr Collins's first letter for Austen's readers, succinctly capturing its tone and alerting us to future comic potential: 'There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well.' And it is Mr Bennet too who cuts through his wife's hysterical demands that he 'make Lizzy marry Mr Collins' with a response which is as firm in judgement as it is comic in tone:

'An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents – Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*.'

Mr Bennet's fondness for Elizabeth is almost as great as Austen's own, and indeed is the only thing which can draw him into sincere and self-revelatory expression. When he begs her to re-think her decision to marry Darcy he does so in terms which not only display his deep affection for her but also reveal his awareness of the roots of his own

marital unhappiness: 'My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life.' But neither his love for Elizabeth nor his capacity for self-knowledge can stir him into taking steps to preserve his own or his family's pride. Elizabeth's plea to him to forbid Lydia her cherished trip to Brighton is couched in terms which stress his responsibility for their public esteem: Lydia will attract 'universal contempt'; she and Kitty will be 'censured and despised'; the whole family will be 'involved in the disgrace'. Elizabeth is of course proved catastrophically right; but her father's acknowledgment of this – 'let me for once in my life feel how much I have been to blame' – dissipates rapidly into his habitual irony and sharp humour. Unlike all the other minor characters in the novel he is sufficiently perceptive to recognise his faults but also, tragically, powerless to alter them.

This combination of perception and paralysis is, I think, unique in Austen's novels. It also forms a counterpoint to the painful, but ultimately successful, learning process of Elizabeth and Darcy. Both are brought to crises which test their understanding, judgement and feeling against earlier pride and prejudice. When Elizabeth reads Darcy's letter, a letter which she first dismisses as 'all pride and insolence', she is forced into a fundamental re-examination of her earlier certainties and indeed of her very self:

'How despicably have I acted! . . . I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities! – How humiliating is this discovery! Yet, how just a humiliation! . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself.'

Here Elizabeth explicitly articulates her fall from unmerited pride into just humiliation. And from this position of self-knowledge she can visit Pemberley with an ability to distinguish between Darcy's proper pride as custodian of property, employer and improver and the inordinate self-esteem which had caused his earlier haughtiness and reserve. Elizabeth's reply to Jane's enquiry as to when she first began to love Darcy – 'I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley' – is not entirely jocular, since it is at Pemberley that she gains direct evidence of the qualities she had already begun to acknowledge in him.

Darcy follows a similar, though more prolonged and more public, journey from pride to humiliation. When Elizabeth tells Darcy of Lydia's elopement with Wickham, she recognises instantly that 'under such proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace' all hope of renewal of his attentions to her must cease. Later, on learning

from Mrs Gardiner of Darcy's part in patching up Lydia's marriage, she rehearses in detail for herself (and as importantly for the reader) the extent to which this constitutes deep humiliation. Darcy's exertions have caused him 'trouble and mortification'; he has made himself a supplicant to 'a woman whom he must abominate and despise' on behalf of a man 'whose very name it was punishment to him to pronounce' and 'a girl whom he could neither regard nor esteem'. Elizabeth wryly acknowledges that 'even her vanity' cannot persuade her that Darcy is doing this for her - 'Brother-in-law of Wickham! Every kind of pride must revolt from the connection' - but also perceives that Darcy's actions display a humility which is a cause for pride:

For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him. Proud that in a cause of compassion and honour, he had been able to get the better of himself.

Both Darcy and Elizabeth, then, follow a complex path through initial pride, mutual humiliation, and final recognition of a proper distribution of humility and self-esteem. Their conversation following the second proposal is devoted, interestingly, less to declarations of love than to analysis of this process, culminating in Darcy's lengthy account of his conversion from 'pride and conceit':

Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson . . . By you, I was properly humbled.

Darcy's lesson is as much in public as in private values. It is taught through individual love, but is manifested in the public arena of money, marriages and shifting social alliances. Darcy not only becomes brother-in-law of Wickham, but also son-in-law of Mrs Bennet; Elizabeth is niece by marriage to Lady Catherine and also the instrument of destroying all marital ambitions for her daughter; the Collinses will inherit Longbourne; Lydia and Wickham are virtual social outcasts. Most significantly, perhaps, the novel's final words emphasise the Gardiners' assured place at Pemberley, a place which an unreformed Darcy could never have accorded a family who live 'within sight of [their] warehouse'. *Pride and Prejudice* is undoubtedly 'light and bright and sparkling'; but it can only seriously be thought to 'want shade' by readers insensitive to its deeply satisfying thematic complexity.

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FURTHER READING

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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE



Chapter I

IT IS A TRUTH universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

'My dear Mr Bennet,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?'

Mr Bennet replied that he had not.

'But it is,' returned she; 'for Mrs Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.'

Mr Bennet made no answer.

'Do not you want to know who has taken it?' cried his wife impatiently.

'You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.'

This was invitation enough.

'Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.'

'What is his name?'

'Bingley.'

'Is he married or single?'

'Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!'

'How so? how can it affect them?'

'My dear Mr Bennet,' replied his wife, 'how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.'

'Is that his design in settling here?'

'Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.'

'I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr Bingley might like you the best of the party.'

'My dear, you flatter me. I certainly *have* had my share of beauty, but I

do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.'

'In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.'

'But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr Bingley when he comes into the neighbourhood.'

'It is more than I engage for, I assure you.'

'But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general you know they visit no newcomers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for *us* to visit him, if you do not.'

'You are over-scrupulous surely. I dare say Mr Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.'

'I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference.'

'They have none of them much to recommend them,' replied he; 'they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.'

'Mr Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.'

'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.'

'Ah! you do not know what I suffer.'

'But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood.'

'It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come since you will not visit them.'

'Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all.'

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. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

Chapter 2

MR BENNET was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid, she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with,

'I hope Mr Bingley will like it Lizzy.'

'We are not in a way to know *what* Mr Bingley likes,' said her mother resentfully, 'since we are not to visit.'

'But you forget, mamma,' said Elizabeth, 'that we shall meet him at the assemblies, and that Mrs Long has promised to introduce him.'

'I do not believe Mrs Long will do any such thing. She has two nieces of her own. She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion of her.'

'No more have I,' said Mr Bennet; 'and I am glad to find that you do not depend on her serving you.'

Mrs Bennet deigned not to make any reply; but unable to contain herself, began scolding one of her daughters.

'Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces.'

'Kitty has no discretion in her coughs,' said her father; 'she times them ill.'

'I do not cough for my own amusement,' replied Kitty fretfully.

'When is your next ball to be, Lizzy?'

'Tomorrow fortnight.'

'Aye, so it is,' cried her mother, 'and Mrs Long does not come back till the day before; so, it will be impossible for her to introduce him, for she will not know him herself.'

'Then, my dear, you may have the advantage of your friend, and introduce Mr Bingley to *her*.'

'Impossible, Mr Bennet, impossible, when I am not acquainted with him myself; how can you be so teasing?'

'I honour your circumspection. A fortnight's acquaintance is certainly very little. One cannot know what a man really is by the end of a night. But if *we* do not venture, somebody else will; and after all, Mrs Long and her nieces must stand their chance; and therefore, as she will think it an act of kindness, if you decline the office, I will take it on myself.'

The girls stared at their father. Mrs Bennet said only, 'Nonsense, nonsense!'

'What can be the meaning of that emphatic exclamation?' cried he. 'Do you consider the forms of introduction, and the stress that is laid on them, as nonsense? I cannot quite agree with you *there*. What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.'

Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

'While Mary is adjusting her ideas,' he continued, 'let us return to Mr Bingley.'

'I am sick of Mr Bingley,' cried his wife.

'I am sorry to hear *that*; but why did not you tell me so before? If I had known as much this morning, I certainly would not have called on him. It is very unlucky; but as I have actually paid the visit, we cannot escape the acquaintance now.'

The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished; that of Mrs Bennet perhaps surpassing the rest; though when the first tumult of joy was over, she began to declare that it was what she had expected all the while.

'How good it was in you, my dear Mr Bennet! But I knew I should persuade you at last. I was sure you loved your girls too well to neglect such an acquaintance. Well, how pleased I am! and it is such a good joke, too, that you should have gone this morning, and never said a word about it till now.'

'Now, Kitty, you may cough as much as you choose,' said Mr Bennet; and, as he spoke, he left the room, fatigued with the raptures of his wife.

'What an excellent father you have, girls,' said she, when the door was shut. 'I do not know how you will ever make him amends for his kindness; or me either, for that matter. At our time of life, it is not so pleasant I can tell you, to be making new acquaintance every day; but for your sakes, we would do anything. Lydia, my love, though you *are* the youngest, I dare say Mr Bingley will dance with you at the next ball.'

'Oh!' said Lydia stoutly, 'I am not afraid; for though I *am* the youngest, I'm the tallest.'

The rest of the evening was spent in conjecturing how soon he would return Mr Bennet's visit, and determining when they should ask him to dinner.