

Saint Jane

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In *Pride and Prejudice*, why does Jane Austen name a character after herself? Let us consider the two Bennet sisters, Jane and Elizabeth. While part of a larger family of sisters and parents, these two are allies, and thereby set apart.

The younger, Elizabeth, is perhaps the most popular of all Austen's creations. She is quick-witted, amused (as is her father) by the foibles and follies of others. "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?" asks Mr. Bennet (364). Other people exist for our amusement, and we for theirs, her father claims, and in her attitude Elizabeth is like him.

She is also like her author. The Jane Austen we know from the clever, careful mind that moves in her novels and letters is a woman who delights in the quirks of human nature.

Elizabeth's spirits soon rising to playfulness again, she wanted Mr Darcy to account for his having ever fallen in love with her . . . "did you admire me for my impertinence?" "For the liveliness of your mind, I did." (380)

Elizabeth is amused rather than intimidated by people. And she speaks to illuminate the nature of her fellow characters, rather than to say what they might like to hear about themselves.

We tend to believe that Jane Austen put a lot of herself into Elizabeth Bennet—including what Elizabeth calls impertinence, and Darcy, tactfully, calls "liveliness of mind." However, the author gives her own Christian name to the character of the older sister, Jane Bennet. And the fictional Jane, far from being a woman who delights in the weaknesses of others, is one who can find no wrong in them.

Elizabeth says of and to Jane:

You never see the 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 . . . to take the good of everybody's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad—belongs to you alone. (14)

Jane Bennet is careful to believe only the best of people, which niceness extends even to the man who has jilted her. When she realizes that Mr. Bingley, the man she loves, has left her, she tells her sister,

I have nothing either to hope or fear, and nothing to reproach him with . . . it has not been more than an error of fancy on my side. . . .

"My dear Jane!" exclaimed Elizabeth, "you are too good. Your sweetness and disinterestedness are really angelic. . . ." (134)

The lady is a saint.

To Jane herself . . . there could be no possible objection. All loveliness and goodness as she is! Her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating. (186)

Who is this paragon, and why is she the author's namesake? It amuses me to think that Jane Austen created in Jane Bennet a saintly woman, all virtue and obligingness, as a foil to her own, the author's character—a character known and loved by her first audience, her own family. It is pleasant to imagine the Austens laughing together over author Jane's creation of a Jane who is purely charitable in her thoughts towards others—a Jane who is never satirical, and certainly never inclined to make a joke about her neighbors.

We know that Austen wrote and then read aloud her work, first to sister Cassandra, her own ally, and then to others in the family. We know that her writing indeed began as a form of family entertainment.

Jane Austen was always to delight in her fools: without compunction she mocks their follies so as to get all the amusement out of them she can. . . . Nor did she write just for herself. [The] early pieces were composed also to amuse her family and friends. Many of them are prefaced by humorous dedications to one or other of them . . . Jane Austen began [writing] in order to contribute to family entertainment. (Cecil 62)

Let us contemplate, then, that as family entertainment, a smiling Jane Austen, known well for quick wit and satiric eye, presents to her intimate circle a Jane who has neither trait. Indeed, she gives them (and us) a Jane who cannot find fault with a living soul—a Jane who is harmless to the extreme—a Jane who is a personified Virtue (to a comically exaggerated extent). In the presence of the fictional Jane, no one need fear that his quirks might be illuminated and used as a source of fun. *This* Jane thinks ill of no one, forgives all, and attributes only noble motives to her fellows.

Perhaps fictional Jane gives the real Jane her chance to play the ingénue. Whereas Elizabeth, ally to both Janes, is the author's chance to say exactly what she likes, to whomever.

This freedom has its limits, of course. At one point, Elizabeth engages Mr. Darcy in a discussion on whether or not he is to be a source of amusement. Darcy suggests that "The wisest and the best of men . . . may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke."

Elizabeth agrees,

Certainly . . . 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. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without. (57)



Thus, we are left with a book in which the author gives a saintly character her own first name—and proceeds to tease that fictional namesake for her very saintliness. It is a very good-humored thing to do. And, given our tendency to make icons of our favorite authors, the joke may include us as well.

WORKS CITED

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