THE WISE AND WITTY WOMEN OF SHAKESPEARE’S AND AUSTEN’S
COMEDIES

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BY

Mary Tyler Storms

APPROVED:

Molly Rothenberg
Director of Thesis

Scott Oldenburg
Second Reader

Thomas Klingler
Third Reader
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The Wise and Witty Women of Shakespeare’s and Austen’s Comedies is an analysis of feminine wit and wisdom as it appears in some of the most significant romantic comedies of the literary canon: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. The first chapter focuses on a Shakespearian character, *Much Ado’s* Beatrice, exploring the creative potential of feminine wit and wisdom as a metaphor for the transformative nature of comedy. The second and third chapters analyze the ways that Jane Austen works with Shakespeare’s ideas. Austen depicts heroines who are wise but not witty (Elinor Dashwood) or vice versa (Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet). All of these characters and the problems they represent help us better understand the comedic genre as a means of providing social, political, moral, and religious commentary within its cultural context.
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“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” -Romans 8:38-9

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Introduction

Certain plot and character patterns tend to appear over and over again in comedies, especially romantic comedies. One of these repeated generic tendencies is that marriage typically concludes the story. Another is that single women usually occupy one of two distinct roles, which I will call the “heiress” and the “witty woman.” The heiress is the highest-ranking single woman in her society. Sometimes, she is the eldest daughter of the most powerful or wealthy man and is therefore an “heiress” in a literal sense. But even if she isn’t in line to inherit a fortune, she is the most beautiful or well-connected single woman in her society. Single men are interested in her, and bystanders are interested in her choice of husband. In other words, the heiress organically commands her society’s attention because of an unearned class status. In the heiress’s household (or nearby) lives another single woman, a “witty woman.” Although the witty woman is the heiress’s closest female relative or friend and usually her ally, her unearned status is somehow subordinate to that of the heiress. She may be younger, less beautiful, or more distantly connected to the powerful man (a member of his extended rather than immediate family, for instance). For whatever reason, she does not organically attract her society’s attention and interest. In this situation, the witty woman clearly has a problem: there is a serious imbalance of power between herself and the heiress. She may not envy the heiress’s superior status and might even enjoy privileges of her own because of their relationship, but of course she wants others’ attention just as much as anyone would; in fact, she needs it if she is to make any kind of advantageous marriage match. Therefore, she must find some way of earning public attention, of stealing the show from the heiress. Wit is a way of solving this problem.
In the introduction of this thesis, I will examine the way that wit shapes the role of the witty women in comedies, focusing primarily on Beatrice from William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* and Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. I will argue that these authors are experimenting and innovating with the twofold nature of feminine wit in romantic comedies. First, the witty woman uses wit to gain power and influence through public attention, though this power is limited by the heiress’s more potent unearned status. Second, she unintentionally shapes her own *Bildung* with her wit by asserting her individuality while also forming relationships with others.

It is important to note that the public nature of the witty woman’s problem is a significant obstacle. As Jane Spencer notes, “fiction of the mid and late eighteenth century concentrates on an examination of domestic, family, and emotional life, and associates them with women” (216). However, the perceived feminine quality of private spaces is evident even before the eighteenth century. The public meekness of Shakespeare’s Hero, the heiress of *Much Ado About Nothing*, is a perfect illustration of feminized private spaces in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Hardly ever speaking when found in male-dominated public spaces, Hero has a total of six lines in the first two acts. Meanwhile, a brief scan of the text will reveal that other characters mention her name at a much more frequent rate (eight mentions in the first act alone). Even though she is clearly a figure of public significance in her community, she rarely ever interacts with her public. Even the necessarily public approval of her engagement to Claudio is a private act communicated to the public by Beatrice’s announcement, “My cousin tells him in his ear that he is in her heart” (2.1.275-6). Though these wedding
plans will forge a very public alliance between Hero’s family, Claudio, and their matchmaker Don Pedro, the cement holding it all together is Hero’s whisper, inaudible even to the audience. Meanwhile, the bulk of Hero’s speaking parts take place at the opening of the third act, when she is alone with her maid, staging a conversation for Beatrice to overhear. In this entirely feminine, private space, Hero has thirteen lines, some of them lengthy enough to be considered short monologues. Here, we have proof that shyness or a quiet disposition cannot explain her silence in the previous scenes. Rather, she strictly conforms to the cultural demands on her behavior in both public and private spaces.

Beatrice, meanwhile, has no such luxury. Hero and Beatrice behave like sisters, and indeed we have plenty of reasons to assume they were brought up in the same household. It is Hero, for example, who correctly interprets Beatrice’s request to know if “Signor Montanto” is with the returning troops—a remark that even Leonato does not understand—as a gibe at Benedick (1.1.25-30). This interaction establishes that Hero has an intimate knowledge of Benedick’s and Beatrice’s history and, we can safely assume, was Beatrice’s confidante during that time in the play’s “prehistory.” However, even from the Dramatis Personae, we know that she is an outranked member of her household. Below Don Pedro and his men, Shakespeare lists:

LEONATO, governor of Messina

HERO, his daughter

BEATRICE, an orphan, his niece (Shakespeare 322).

Even in this brief description of her character’s position, Beatrice is distanced from the family circle. There is certainly a family connection here (she is “his niece”), but
Beatrice is primarily “an orphan.” She may be part of Leonato’s household, and she may be like a sister to Hero. But the text makes it clear that she will never be anyone’s sister or daughter. This ranking is a serious disadvantage in the marriage market.

This heiress/witty woman model found in *Much Ado* is the most straightforward out of the texts that will be analyzed in this introduction, and it lays the foundation for later authors who manipulate the model for their own purposes. Congreve’s *Love for Love*, for example, features a “witty woman” figure, Angelica, who happens to be a literal heiress. Though she has a fortune of her own, she is an orphan who lives with her uncle and cousin.1 Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, meanwhile, combines the witty woman and the heiress in a single heroine, Harriett Byron, who is of a subordinate status in her family as an orphan raised by cousins. She herself admits to having witty tendencies, which she refers to as “a satirical vein” (48). Despite her wit and subordinate ranking, Harriett’s exceptional beauty and merit earn her “heiress” status. This thesis will focus on Shakespeare as a predecessor to Austen, but she is certainly not the only author who drew from *Much Ado*.

Of Austen’s works, *Pride and Prejudice* particularly adheres to the heiress/witty woman precedent set by *Much Ado*. None of the Bennet sisters are orphaned cousins, but there is a definite ranking of oldest to youngest in this family. Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s reaction to the idea of “all five out at once” illustrates the idea that sisters’ rankings ought to dictate their degree of public presence: “Very odd! And you [Elizabeth] only the second. The younger ones out before the older ones are married!” (Austen 109). There is already a class system within the family based on age alone. And

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1 Congreve’s heroine is a precursor to Austen’s Emma, a character who will be featured in my third chapter.
had the Bennets been strict conformists to the status quo, Elizabeth would have had no access to public space whatsoever until Jane’s marriage. Fortunately for the Bennets (and the novel’s plot), this is not the case, and all the sisters are free to attend every local gathering. Nevertheless, the expectation remains that Jane should command public attention because, as the oldest, she is the “heiress” (an especially interesting term for Jane, who is anything but an heiress in a literal sense). Therefore, she is expected to attract a suitor’s attention first.

And indeed, society’s expectations are met to a certain degree. From the outset, she attracts plenty more attention than any of her outranked sisters. It is at the very first public gathering in the novel that Mr. Darcy declares Jane to be “the only handsome girl in the room” and Mr. Bingley agrees that “She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld!” (Austen 7,8). It is important to note that shortly after this exchange, Darcy utters the famous line, “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me,” referring to the subordinate Elizabeth (8). Of course, it is possible that Jane is perceived as the most beautiful simply because she already attracts so much attention as the heiress of her family. Whether or not her rank may impact others’ biases, a potential suitor and the high-ranking Mr. Darcy have both decreed that Jane is superior in both age and looks.

In other words, Jane’s “heiress” status makes it easy for her to conform to social expectations for feminine behavior, at least in theory. Indeed, Jane’s defining characteristics are her conventionally feminine modesty and passivity, traits she can afford to have because of the reasonable expectation that things will work out on their own for her. These conventionally feminine characteristics are so deeply engrained in Jane that they keep her from even having an awareness of her real power. When
reflecting on the characters they met at the novel’s first social gathering, she tells
Elizabeth that she “was very much flattered by his asking me to dance a second time. I
did not expect such a compliment.” Elizabeth’s response, “Did not you? I did for you.
But that is one great difference between us,” reveals that Elizabeth is acutely aware of
this power and status dynamic at work, unlike her sister (Austen 9). Indeed, Elizabeth’s
chief observation near the end of the conversation is that “to be candid without
ostentation or design—to take the good of everybody’s character and make it still better,
and say nothing of the bad—belongs to you alone” (10). Unlike most people in both
literature and the real world, Jane has no agenda. So we like her, and Elizabeth likes her.
After all, what is not to like, except perhaps a touch of naïveté?

But isn’t the fact that Hero and Jane are likable, sisterly figures itself a problem?
Not on the surface, perhaps. Nevertheless, the fact remains that regardless of how well
female characters may get along with each other, they are competitors on the marriage
market. If the heiress were the witty woman’s enemy, then the witty woman would feel
no obligation to her. She would be free to act out of pure self-interest. Darcy’s initial
declaration of love would have been an entirely different experience had Elizabeth felt no
loyalty to her sister. Indeed, a significant factor in her prejudice against Darcy is the way
he wronged Jane. Similarly, Beatrice’s loyalty to Hero creates tension in Benedick’s and
her relationship when she demands the murder of his friend Claudio out of intense anger
on her cousin’s behalf (Shakespeare 4.1.286–9). These heroines’ positive relationships
with their heiresses only create more obstacles along the way to their happy endings.
Suppose Cinderella were best friends with her stepsisters. Would she still want to go to
the ball and compete for the same prince? This is a serious problem for the witty woman.
For the sake of her own social and financial survival, she must find some way of distinguishing herself and gaining public attention without scandalizing her society or betraying her heiress. How can she act out of self-interest and the heiress’s interest at the same time?

The solution is her brain. She produces entertainment and insight to attract and maintain an audience, earning status of her own as a sort of female bard. Simultaneously, developing a “personal brand” of her own as the witty woman helps distance herself from the more conventional heiress, ensuring that neither steals the other’s audience. Rather, they attract different kinds of attention and different kinds of suitors. Of course, this strategy is not necessarily scandalous, but it is certainly unconventional and defies social expectations for women to a certain degree. As Penny Gay points out, “Elizabeth, like Beatrice, is marked out as different from the other young women” (79). This difference is certainly part of what makes them remarkable, remembered characters, but it is also a decidedly public, unfeminine difference.

I choose the word “unfeminine” instead of “masculine” because women certainly occupied public spaces in Austen’s time and even before. As Jane Spencer argues, “We cannot simply impose the model of gendered separate spheres—public for men—onto eighteenth-century life” (217). The public sphere was no longer a completely masculine space for Austen. After all, she herself was part of it as a published author, as were many other women of her time. Therefore, we cannot say that the witty woman, particularly Elizabeth, is a revolutionary feminist figure. By the same token, I do not mean that she is somehow upholding or supporting patriarchy. But I do mean that she is interested in maintaining her own and her heiress’s status within a system where they are necessarily
competitors, even if that means sacrificing her chance to fully meet society’s expectations for women’s behavior.\textsuperscript{2} The witty woman can never be the demure belle of the ball.

It is also important to note that these witty women are able to defy the status quo in this way because there is no authoritative male figure keeping their behavior in check. As Beatrice herself remarks, “it is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please you.’” (2.1.44-5). One advantage of not being anyone’s daughter or sister is that Beatrice can behave as she wants. The only real consequence of invading public space as she does is the possibility of being judged. We know that Hero, for example, despite their sisterly relationship—or perhaps because of it—is among those passing judgment on her. According to Hero, “her wit / Values itself so highly that to her / All matter else seems weak” (3.1.52-4). Hero, living in the “bubble” of heiress-hood, cannot relate to Beatrice’s predicament. But whatever Beatrice’s peers may think, they lack the authority to correct her behavior, and Beatrice remains free to solve the predicament of her situation with wit.

The same is true of Elizabeth Bennet. She may not be orphaned, but her father is not a real presence in her family life. In the novel’s first chapter, the reader witnesses Mrs. Bennet’s hopeless efforts to start a conversation with her husband, to which he replies, “You want to tell me [what you have to say], and I have no objection to hearing it” (Austen 2). In this same passage, we learn about his low opinion of their daughters: “They have none of them much to recommend them” with the exception of Elizabeth of course, who has “something more of quickness than her sisters” (3). Mr. Bennet is not a family man. He may prefer Elizabeth to the rest of his family, but he is not involved in

\begin{footnote}{2} See my third chapter for a more detailed analysis of Elizabeth Bennet’s social failures.\end{footnote}
family life. And it is of course important to note that Mr. Bennet is in many ways the Dr. Frankenstein who originally created the predicaments that Jane and Elizabeth face. The narrator tells us that he married Mrs. Bennet for the wrong reasons (“youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humor which youth and beauty generally give”) and he later failed to provide adequate dowries or inheritance of any sort for their daughters (Austen 154). Mr. Bennet simply does not care, and so Elizabeth may behave as she wishes because even if she were not his favorite child, it wouldn’t matter to him.

However, this freedom is limited. In a time of crisis, we find that the witty woman must let go of her audience and status and defer to her family’s needs. The most straightforward example of this takes place in Much Ado, in the aftermath of the tragic wedding, when Claudio slanders Hero and jilts her at the altar. It is in these scenes that Beatrice drops her witty act and allows Hero’s crisis to command all attention. Left alone onstage with Benedick at the end of the scene, she is so preoccupied with her heiress’s situation that she can hardly converse with him, let alone engage in witty banter:

Benedick: Hear me, Beatrice.

Beatrice: Talk with a man out a window—a proper saying!

Benedick: Nay, but Beatrice.

Beatrice: Sweet Hero, she is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone.

Benedick: Beat—

Beatrice: Princes and counties! (4.1.305-11)

Here, Beatrice has every opportunity she could ever want to engage in witty banter with Benedick, but this is no time for wit. Her normal behavior would be in poor taste.

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3 See my third chapter for a more in-depth description of Mr. Bennet’s failings.
Beatrice cannot possibly continue cracking jokes in the face of Hero’s loss. And she would not want to do so even if she could because she is heartbroken for her cousin. Here, we see a flaw in the witty woman’s strategy to obtain her own audience: it only works if all is well with the heiress.

*Pride and Prejudice* is not as straightforward with regard to the moment of crisis. Jane is never slandered or jilted at the altar, though an authority figure does convince her love interest to reject her. In fact, Penny Gay considers this rejection to be a close parallel to Hero’s scandal and faked death (80). I, however, do not consider Bingley’s abrupt departure to London and unwillingness to see her afterward as the event qualifying Jane as an “heiress-in-distress.” In present-day terms, we would say that Bingley “ghosted” her. It is disappointing for Jane that this would happen, but the interruption of a courtship does not constitute the ruin of her reputation or a tragic loss. Discussing the situation with Elizabeth, Jane finds an explanation that satisfies her, which is that she had been “mistaken” about Bingley’s true feelings (91). Hero has no such luxury. Until the watchmen reveal the malicious scheme afoot, she and her family simply cannot explain the disastrous events at the wedding. Bingley’s friends object to his marrying Jane for reasons that have been obvious from the beginning: undesirable connections and no inheritance. Claudio’s friends believe that Hero has totally misrepresented herself to society. These two situations are not equally serious for the heroines.

Rather, it is Lydia’s elopement that constitutes the crisis in *Pride and Prejudice*. On the surface, this is an unlikely choice. Lydia is the youngest and most socially careless Bennet sister. She is certainly not the heiress of this story. However, her misconduct comes very close to ruining the sisters’ chances of making a desirable
marriage match. We find Elizabeth alone with Darcy in the aftermath of hearing the news about Lydia, realizing that “everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace” (Austen 179). The Bennet family, already in social peril for plenty of other reasons, quite literally cannot afford a scandal. The sisters will be destitute after their father’s death. They have only a handful of key qualities going for them in a competitive marriage market, and this scandal is on the brink of dashing their reputations to smithereens, barring them from making valuable connections, either with social climbers (like the Bingleys) or the aristocracy (like the Darcys/de Bourghs). This makes Jane and Elizabeth both victims of the scandal. Indeed, the Bennets find themselves “dead” (like Hero) to society outside the family because they are so overwhelmed with the situation at hand, for “Every day at Longbourn was now a day of anxiety” (192). And rightfully so. The futures of not just the heiress, but all four sisters, are suddenly hanging in the balance.

In this case, the use of wit to obtain an audience is pointless. Elizabeth, distraught for herself and her family, “burst into tears” in the middle of a conversation with Darcy (Austen 179). Like Beatrice, she can hardly communicate her distress. Arriving home, it is Jane who first greets her and who later shares the household’s experience of the scandal. And like Beatrice, concern for her heiress occupies much of Elizabeth’s attention. Elizabeth says that she fears caring for Mrs. Bennet “has been too much for [Jane]” since she has “had every care and anxiety upon [her]self alone” (189). For some time, Jane has been isolated as she faces this disaster without a true confidante. It is also important to note that even in the unlikely alternate universe where Wickham always intended to marry Lydia, this entire situation would have violated Jane’s heiress ranking.
As mentioned above, Jane was supposed to have been courted and married first. As good-natured as she is to not bring it up outright and even care for her other family members in the midst of the crisis, the subtext of the whole situation is that Jane is the one with the most to lose. And if Jane has lost her audience, Elizabeth certainly has none. This example as well as *Much Ado’s* disastrous wedding both illustrate the flaw in the witty woman’s strategy. In a time of crisis, she must defer to the heiress’s ranking, not just out of social obligation but also out of her own emotional distress as a member of the heiress’s family and community. Feminine wit is very useful most of the time for gaining attention and status, but it has its limitations.

It is at this point in my argument that wit’s role shifts. We have already seen that as an unmarried woman without any other true authority figure, the witty woman is free to form her own ideas about femininity and make her own decisions. So far, I have treated wit as an instrument the witty woman uses for some other ends, but it also shapes her development as a character. In Austen’s case, emphasis on wit as a force that shapes character accords with the novel’s development with the rise of individualism.

According to John Richetti, this genre has a tendency “to validate the perspective of the newly conceptualized modern individual, whose particularized and personalized view of the world is explored as if it were somehow prior to a communal or social world” (5). Austen and her contemporaries were interested in individuals: who they are, how they became who they are, how they relate to one another, and why they perform for each other. I have argued that feminine wit shapes society’s view of a woman, but it also

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4 This movement toward individualism plays an important role in *Sense and Sensibility*. See my second chapter for a more thorough discussion of this topic.
shapes the woman herself and how she relates to others. The consequence of this social strategy is that the witty woman internalizes her persona.

This relational aspect of feminine wit is most evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the witty woman is the protagonist and we therefore get special access to all of her interactions with others. As Elvira Casal eloquently puts it, “For Elizabeth, laughter is an invitation to fellowship” (par. 22). Casal’s article is primarily interested in the relationship between wit and sexuality, but I want to emphasize how wit shapes “fellowship” in general. Though romantic love will certainly play a role in this phenomenon—these are *romantic* comedies, after all—wit defines the witty woman’s relationships with family and friends as well as her future husband.

Elizabeth uses wit to share her thoughts and opinions with her closest friends. While they are discussing their first impression of Bingley, Jane lists some good character qualities she has observed in her new love interest, to which Elizabeth wittily replies, “He is also handsome, […] which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete” (Austen 9). The witty persona Elizabeth has developed for herself plays a role even in a private conversation with her sister. Moreover, she is using wit to agree with Jane and contribute to their conversation in a meaningful way, to say as only Elizabeth can, “Yes, I see that you find this young man attractive. I approve your choice and hope that things go well for you.” The same is true of her relationship with her closest friend outside of the family, Charlotte Lucas. Reflecting on Jane’s and Bingley’s developing courtship, they engage in a friendly debate about how well the new couple has acquired a sense of each other’s character, with Charlotte insisting that “four evenings may do a great deal.” Elizabeth replies, “Yes;
these four evenings have enabled them to ascertain that they both like Vingt-un better than Commerce” (15). This friendly gibe at her friend is another example of feminine wit utilized for relational purposes. Elizabeth’s wit shows that she disagrees with Charlotte but wants to engage further in the conversation, to explain her case and delve deeply into further analysis of the situation with her friend. For Elizabeth, wit is a means of engaging in sisterly friendships in private as well as public spaces.

This platonically relational aspect of feminine wit is more subtle in Much Ado for two reasons. First, Beatrice may be the female lead, but male characters and their relationships are the play’s primary focus, which makes perfect sense. William Shakespeare was a man, all the actors in his troupe were men, and he understood how men relate to the world. Second, Beatrice is often in scenes with characters who are more closely connected to each other than to her. In modern-day slang, we might say she “third-wheels” with the betrothed Hero and Claudio or the father/daughter pair Hero and Leonato, often using wit to interject herself into a conversation where she is otherwise irrelevant. One example of this situation occurs at the beginning of Leonato’s party, when Beatrice answers a remark that was clearly intended for Hero:

Leonato [to Hero]: Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer.

Beatrice: The fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not wooed in good time. […] (2.1.55-8).

There is really no reason for Beatrice to spout off music puns in the middle of a very serious discussion about Hero’s future. She is simply showing off in this scene because, unlike Elizabeth Bennet, her experience is not central to the story’s plot or structure.
Rather, the action of this scene revolves around high-ranking men arranging the heiress’s courtship and betrothal, and Shakespeare places considerably less emphasis on the relational aspect of Beatrice’s wit outside of her romantic relationship.

Though it is never the central action of Much Ado, we do get occasional glimpses of this “fellowshipping” side of feminine wit. One of the most interesting witty exchanges of this kind takes place shortly after Claudio’s and Hero’s betrothal, as Beatrice is light-heartedly complaining about her single status:

Beatrice: [...] I may sit in a corner and cry ‘heigh-ho for a husband.’

Don Pedro: Lady Beatrice, I will get you one.

Beatrice: I would rather have one of your father’s getting. Hath your grace ne’er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands if a maid could come by them.

Don Pedro: Will you have me, lady?

Beatrice: No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days. Your grace is too costly to wear every day. (2.1.279-87)

Feminine wit exposes both Don Pedro’s and Beatrice’s pretenses in this exchange. Beatrice’s flattering and witty remarks reduce an otherwise dignified aristocrat to a hopeless admirer proposing marriage to Leonato’s orphaned niece. Meanwhile, Don Pedro’s proposal reveals that the “old maid” persona Beatrice has taken on for this particular performance is a farce. She could marry a prince if she wanted. In the

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5 Interestingly, Elizabeth’s intelligence reduces Mr. Darcy in the same way in Pride and Prejudice. He spends much of the novel embarrassed at the idea that he would fall in love with a Bennet sister—or worse—that such a person would reject him.
aftermath of this exchange, Don Pedro and Beatrice grow serious because each has exposed the other’s performance:

Beatrice: I beseech your grace, pardon me. I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

Don Pedro: Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you; for out o’ question, you were born in a merry hour. (2.1.287-292)

Here, we see the decidedly “unwitty” consequence of the earlier witty exchange. Having used wit to expose these invented personas, Beatrice and Don Pedro suddenly have nothing to say but the truth: Beatrice apologizes for her constant silliness, and Don Pedro asserts that it is a wonderful quality. Paradoxically, witty artifice gives rise to authentic human connection because these characters have removed each other’s masks.

Clearly, the impact of feminine wit in Shakespeare’s and Austen’s works is profound. The witty woman intentionally uses it to improve her status, but it inadvertently becomes crucial to all of her relationships, not only those from which she intends to acquire status. But if everything depends on wit for this character, she must confront an additional problem: the moral ambiguity of wit. In drawing attention to herself, does the witty woman harm others? This is a question which will reappear throughout my thesis as I examine the treatment of the witty woman in Shakespeare’s and Austen’s comedies.

My first chapter will examine the complex treatment of genre conventions in Much Ado as they pertain to the witty woman. Though it has influenced many romantic comedies over the centuries, Much Ado veers dangerously close to tragedy in its plot and character development. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the ways in which Beatrice
is aligned with both wit and wisdom, as evidenced in the redemptive nature of her role in the comedy. By examining the song in the play, “Sigh No More,” and the witty woman, Beatrice, this chapter will show how feminine wit functions as a metaphor for the genre of comedy.

Having established the relationships between feminine wit, wisdom, and comedy as they appear in Shakespeare, I will turn to Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. At first glance, Austen’s heroine Elinor *appears* to be wise but not witty; however, this is not actually the case. Elinor is a heroine of judgment. Through the examination of her limitations, it becomes evident that wisdom entails the flexibility of empathetic and emotional understanding. Moreover, through Elinor’s rival Lucy Steele, Austen simultaneously demonstrates her alternate view of wit: a perspective in which wit is useful yet morally ambiguous.

The moral ambiguity of feminine wit is featured again in the third chapter on the witty women of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. While Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are witty, they lack wisdom to understand that they are trapped by their failure to live up to mistaken standards which dictate their social lives. This idea is most clearly understood through the lens of the Christian idea of grace. Accordingly, the heroines must accept the unearned love and respect of the heroes in order to solve their respective predicaments. Consequently, they are able to establish communities based on the principles of grace and intelligence in spite of their wit. Community will also be featured in my conclusion, in which I will discuss the witty woman’s metaliterary relationship to comedy.
Chapter 1: The Redemption of Tragedy in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*

William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* tests the boundaries of comedy. After all, tragic events are at its core and in its periphery. Having already lived through a terrible war, the characters continue to endure the consequences of Don Pedro’s and Don John’s sibling rivalry as the play unfolds. As a result, *Much Ado*’s action revolves around Don John’s effort to exact vengeance on his estranged brother by ruining a wedding. The play’s otherwise lighthearted conclusion promises even more fraternal violence in the characters’ near future (5.4.121-2). Shift the events depicted even slightly, and *Much Ado About Nothing* ends tragically, with violence and needless deaths. Yet, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the play is a comedy. Therefore, a question arises: what does Shakespeare accomplish by setting his characters on tragic, hopeless-seeming trajectories only to redirect them so that they fit into a comedic structure? The answer, I will argue, has to do with the creative potential that feminine wit and comedy have in common. This is not to say that feminine wit is unique to *Much Ado*; on the contrary, many of Shakespeare’s comedies feature a witty woman. However, feminine wit plays a unique role in *Much Ado*’s complex relationship to genre which is worth discussing independently of the other comedies. The song at the heart of the play and Beatrice’s feminine wit both highlight comedy’s peculiar ability to use tragic events as material for creative comic endeavors. This model for thinking about comedy ultimately gives rise to the notion of hope as a necessary component in restoring a broken community.

To establish the prevalence of the near-tragic in *Much Ado*, I will first analyze some of the distinct ways that tragedy manifests in the narrative. It does so most overtly
in the catastrophic wedding scene, when Hero faints and appears dead to her cousin Beatrice. This misdiagnosis sends her father Leonato into panic, and it is ultimately Friar Francis (the clergyman officiating the ceremony) who is the first to ask, “wherefore should she not ['look up’]?” (4.1.118). Only the outsider assumes that Hero is still alive. Everyone else present has lost all hope in her very existence. They imagine that after having been accused of infidelity at the altar, it makes sense that Hero would somehow spontaneously die. This wedding is an utter disaster, and one wonders how Hero, her family, and Messina will ever recover.

Perhaps inspired by these reactions of despair and hopelessness, Friar Francis hatches a scheme to allow Hero to remain dead in the eyes of the public and then proceed according to the public response. In a literal sense, this death is a farce, but it is decidedly real in that all members of the family experience a loss when the plan goes into action. As Carol Cook observes, the characters actively working to feign Hero’s death are the most affected by it as they transform into her “mourners and avengers” (197). Friar Francis himself acknowledges this when he says to Hero, “Come, lady, die to live” (4.1.153). Hidden away from all but her family, the friar, and Benedick, Hero may remain literally alive, but her social life will end. Indeed, the friar acknowledges that should public opinion remain adverse toward her, she could remain “In some reclusive and religious life, / Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries” for the rest of her life (4.1.242). In other words, she would be sheltered from the evils of the world, especially mean-spirited gossip, but her experience of its joys would be restricted to private religious practice. A kind of death has really occurred here. Indeed, Beatrice’s intimate conversation with her love interest Benedick following the wedding features visceral
responses similar to stages of grief. As the conversation opens, she is weeping and declares that she will continue to do so for some time, but then quickly shifts to expressions of profound anger (4.1.255-6, 299-304). As Hero goes into hiding, Beatrice goes into mourning. The chaos surrounding Juliet-like Hero at her wedding is exactly what one would expect from a tragedy. Yet weddings typically define the comedic genre rather than subvert it. This fact in itself encapsulates the topsy-turvy genre status of *Much Ado*.

However, tragedy is not only in *Much Ado*’s plot but also in its character development. Despite her comic wit, Beatrice herself is on a tragic trajectory. She communicates this idea herself in moments when her usually lighthearted dialogue takes an occasional turn for the serious and cryptic. Shortly after she finishes a witty speech on the likeness of marriage to a Scotch jig, Leonato compliments Beatrice’s insight, saying, “Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly,” to which she replies, “I have a good eye, uncle. I can see a church by day-light” (2.1.67-9). Shakespeare’s editor puts forth, “[I can] see what’s in front of me” as the modern-day equivalent to Beatrice’s figure of speech (2.1.69n5). I agree that this is the intended surface-level meaning, especially in the context of the dialogue. Beatrice wishes to express that she has no special powers of wisdom. She simply understands people and institutions by observing her surroundings and taking note of the obvious, just as one would take note of a large, ornate building on a sunny day. After all, churches were quite distinct from the buildings that would have surrounded them at this time.

The fact that Beatrice would abruptly insert the otherwise unrelated idea of a church into this dialogue is a complicating factor in an analysis of her character. The
characters in a comedy (especially Leonato and Hero, Beatrice’s audience in this scene) are most concerned with the church’s function as the setting of a wedding. However, for Beatrice specifically, a church building would have darker implications. Though it is not discussed often in the play itself, we know from the Dramatis Personae that Beatrice is “an orphan” living in the house of her uncle Leonato (Shakespeare 322). It is reasonable to infer from this information that Beatrice strongly associates a church with its function as the setting of funerals and the local cemetery, perhaps more so than the characters with whom she shares the stage. Indeed, no other character is identified so early on as being directly impacted by death.

Beatrice’s orphan-hood opens up a unique angle for discussing her tragic trajectory. After politely declining Don Pedro’s marriage proposal, the prince makes an effort to compliment her wit, saying, “to be merry best becomes you; for out o’ question, you were born in a merry hour.” (2.1.290-2). Beatrice replies, “No, sure, my lord, my mother cried. But then there was a star danced, and under that I was born” (2.1.293-4). In this myth-like description of her origins, Beatrice wittily but staunchly objects to the idea that the moment of her birth was “merry.” Indeed, she immediately shifts the conversation away from herself and to her laboring mother, who “cried” during this hour. Claire McEachern explains that this word choice has a multifaceted meaning. It is a realistic correction—her mother was certainly “crying” in pain—as well as a reference to the Biblical punishment of delivering children “in sorrow” after Eve’s disobedience (2.1.308n). After Beatrice is born, the story ends. She does not elaborate on anyone’s merriment at that time, except perhaps an anthropomorphized star (which I will discuss in further detail later on). I would suggest that by focusing on her mother’s pain, avoiding
any image of human merriment, and abruptly ending the story, this speech hints at the possibility that Beatrice’s mother died in childbirth. Of course, there is no direct indication of this in the text, and so any further discussion of Beatrice’s parents would be speculative. Regardless of her parentage, this description indicates that Beatrice is aware of the danger marriage, sex, and pregnancy present to women of her time. Beatrice is not abnormal for thinking of childbirth in such terms. Having children was a worrisome process for future parents and their relatives, so much so that the archival evidence of anxiety surrounding births is severely disproportionate to the true maternal mortality rate under the Tudor monarchs. The vast majority of mothers delivered healthy babies without any complications, but fears abounded in the days leading up to every birth (Cressy 30). Nevertheless, these fears seem out of place in a play which will end long before Hero could possibly give birth to a child. Beatrice sees a not-so-bright future for her cousin (or herself, should she ever be inclined to marry) beyond the normal parameters of this genre.

With this in mind, Beatrice’s witty tirades against marriage cannot be explained solely as sheer pessimism or, as Cook suggests, a willingness to participate in Messina’s male community (191). Rather, Beatrice is expressing her knowledge of what can go terribly wrong, the tragic potential of her circumstances. One poignant illustration of how this impacts her view of Hero’s betrothal takes place during the scene in which Leonato prepares Hero to accept a proposal of marriage should one be offered at the ball. Before Hero can answer her father, Beatrice rudely interjects with the nine-line monologue comparing marriage to a Scotch Jig:

"..."
The fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not wooed in good time. If the Prince be too important, tell him there is measure in everything, and so dance out the answer. For hear me, Hero, wooing, wedding, and repenting is a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace. The first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig—and full as fantastical; the wedding mannerly modest, as a measure, full of state and ancentry. And then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster till he sink into his grave. (2.1.64-6)

Once again, Beatrice has introduced a tragic image into an otherwise lighthearted conversation. Furthermore, Beatrice’s “Scotch jig” speech is oddly prophetic of Hero’s marriage, the immediate consequences of which are Claudio “repenting” his alliance to Hero and the imagined grave into which Hero must “sink” before her reputation is restored. In fact, Beatrice’s first line in the disastrous wedding scene is “Why, how now, cousin, wherefore sink you down?” (4.1.108). Literally, she is referring to the fainting spell that has come over Hero, but Beatrice’s use of the word “sink” echoes her earlier prognosis for all brides. Then, when asked about Hero’s condition, Beatrice replies, “Dead, I think,” confirming the link between her earlier speech and her experience of the events at hand (4.1.111). Predisposed to imagine a close relationship between marriage, birth, and death (the categories of a parish register), it is easy for Beatrice to jump to the conclusion that Hero has fallen dead as a result of this unusually painful marriage scene. And yet the play in question is a comedy.

As a solution to the seeming contradictions of this play’s relationship to genre, I suggest turning to the song which begins “Sigh no more…” This song, sung in the play’s second act, has no importance to the plot. On the contrary, its performance interrupts the
action of the play. Its significance, I will suggest, lies in its provision of a short manual for a particular reading of this play. Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, it illuminates a relationship between tragedy, comedy, and feminine wit in *Much Ado*. It begins:

> Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.  
> Men were deceivers ever,  
> One foot in sea, and one on shore,  
> To one thing constant never. (2.3.56-9)

The most important information in this song is contained in its first line, which establishes that it is addressed to “ladies” who have been upset for some time. This song is about to make a case as to why these unhappy women should cease their sighing. However, before it does so, it explains the tragic situation they find themselves in. The ladies are victims of men who simply cannot make up their minds. Though these fickle men are “deceivers,” it is clear that their efforts at deception have been fruitless. Otherwise, these women would not be sighing. They are fully, tragically aware that their men have tried and failed to lie.

Moreover, the song’s second verse elaborates further on the absurdity and predictability of men’s fickleness, transitioning into a creative space where the listener is given a reason to laugh. We are told that “The fraud of men was ever so / Since summer first was leafy” (2.3.66-7). Interestingly, men’s fraud is associated with summer. According to the theory of the four humors, summer is closely associated with youth or adolescence (Sears 27). It is therefore possible to infer that the inevitable trials of love are portrayed as summertime problems, evidence themselves of carefree youthfulness.
Additionally, the song insists, this kind of thing is nothing new. Just as summer has always been leafy, men have always been deceivers. And, most importantly, they have never been good deceivers, so much so that we can now look back at all the male deception in history without having been fooled in the slightest. As the song continues, the listener is made to realize the laughability of this otherwise tragic situation.

Each verse of the song concludes with a chorus, which tells the listener what she ought to do with this information:

Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny, nonny. (2.3.60-3)

Instead of “sighing” about the men’s folly, the ladies are told to let foolish, inconstant men be and take control over the narrative for the sake of their own happiness. One accomplishes this by taking an active role in how the story is told. Rather than languishing in sighs, one creatively “converts” the sadness and transforms it into whatever “hey nonny nonny” is. The ambiguity of the last phrase is also significant because it gives the listener freedom to transform one’s circumstances into whatever she wants. The result, we can infer from the tone, is celebratory.

At this point, it is worth noting that this song is sung by men to men in the play. No women are present in the scene. However, this fact neither validates nor contradicts the points I have discussed up until now, except perhaps by surprising us a little. One might expect the men of Messina to laugh in private about the fickleness of women, but instead, they are singing about how fickle they themselves are, how miserable they make
women, and how easily outsmarted men are. If they are attempting to build up their own egos by pointing out how women are forced to passively endure their misbehavior, then the men have again failed by describing women as active, intelligent agents who ultimately control their own lives.

In many ways, this song encapsulates *Much Ado*’s overall narrative structure. The first stanza is an oddly fitting description of the play’s men. Male characters like Don Pedro and Don John are certainly “deceivers” whether their intent be good or evil (2.3.57). The matchmaking scheme is a perfect example of how effective masculine deception can be in this play: Benedick and Beatrice are so taken in that they render their matchmakers’ lies true by harboring affection for each other. Even Friar Francis counts as a “deceiver,” since he is the one to suggest that Hero and her family publicly announce her death. The next line, which declares that men have “One foot in sea, and one on shore” applies both literally and figuratively to the male characters (2.3.58). As soldiers, they have made lives for themselves away at sea during the war, and they are reestablishing a presence “on shore” in Messina now that the war has ended. The water/earth distinction indicated by an allusion to the sea and shore alludes to humoral theory, specifically the phlegmatic and melancholic humors, which are both cold (Sears 12, 27). In other words, there is a suggestion here that the men’s humors are not just imbalanced, but feminine in the sense of being inconstant (a stereotype derived from women losing their bodily fluids through menstruation). But of course, this is primarily a metaphor explained in the subsequent line, “To one thing constant never” (2.3.59). Just as they cannot choose between the sea and the shore, men cannot choose one woman. Here, the song becomes clearly more applicable to Benedick and Beatrice than to any
other set of characters, since Benedick “wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat, it ever changes with the next block” (1.1.60). As mentioned above, fickleness is Beatrice’s chief complaint when it comes to Benedick. If anyone has difficulty keeping both feet on shore in this play, it is him.

Furthermore, all attempts at deception are revealed by the play’s end, and, just as the song suggests, the would-be-wrongdoers are simply ridiculous. Once again, this song perfectly mirrors the narrative, in which the most foolish characters, Dogberry and his men, condemn Don John’s malicious deception and clear Hero’s name. In a sense, comic characters like Dogberry hail their audience to “sigh no more” in full knowledge of how tragedy has affected the characters (2.3.56). Ultimately, the malicious deceivers—Don John and his men—flee Messina and, as the song describes, the comic characters simply “let them go.” Benedick is not worried in the least about chasing Don John as the play concludes, insisting that the company gathered “Think not on him till tomorrow” (5.4.121). This event is an apt example of how the play narrowly avoids tragic outcomes, for a pursuit of Don John would entail violent—and possibly fatal—encounters. Instead, only one overtly tragic event (Hero’s wedding) is allowed in the plot, and even that is embellished with comic characters and love plots that transform it into a tale that both fits genre conventions and uplifts its audience.

Once again, I would like to present Beatrice as a primary example of how the problem of Much Ado’s genre goes beyond issues of plot. Here, I will suggest that the solution presented in “Sigh No More” is reiterated in Beatrice’s wit as a means of guiding us through the instructions presented in the song. To do so, I must first briefly depart from my study of Much Ado and turn to the work which her name references, Dante’s La
Though Dante’s Beatrice is not particularly witty, a glance at her role first as Dante’s inspiration, his torment, and ultimately, his guide will provide insight into the role of Shakespeare’s witty woman of the same name.

Indeed, both Dante and Benedick are simultaneously inspired and tormented by their respective Beatrices. *La Vita Nuova* itself is essentially a collection of poems paired with prose explanations of how Beatrice serves as the inspiration for each. Meanwhile, in *Much Ado*, almost all of Benedick’s most clever speeches are somehow inspired by love or disdain for Beatrice (or marriage/love in general). Benedick, of course, “was not born under a rhyming planet,” but he certainly attempts to string some verses together when he and Beatrice are on good terms (5.2.34). At one point, he sings:

The god love
That sits above
And knows me, and knows me,
How pitiful I deserve (5.2.22-5)

Shakespeare’s editor explains that this is a direct quotation from a common love ballad (5.2.25n6). That said, even if Shakespeare was not the original author of these lines, they are worth comparing to Dante’s love poetry, such as:

Often I think of how I can be undone
by Love, and I feel pity for all men
in whom this derangement happens. (66)

In both instances, love is personified, either as a “god” or by the capitalization of its name. Both speakers are rendered passive objects which love acts upon. And both speakers insist that they are rendered “pitiful” or deserving of “pity” by the tortures of
being in love. This is not to say that Dante directly inspired Shakespeare or this song, but it is to say that two characters named Beatrice have inspired similar reactions from poets in two very significant works of literature. I would like to suggest that this is one component of the role which both characters occupy.

It is also worthy of note that the Beatrice of *La Vita Nuova*, like Shakespeare’s Beatrice, is on a tragic trajectory which paradoxically creates an opportunity for her to enter a creative space. In the middle of the work, Beatrice is orphaned (82). Accordingly, one of Dante’s poems is inspired by the sympathy he feels for her at her father’s funeral ceremony (83). The last several poems are inspired by her death. In the case of Dante’s fiction, however, this is not the end of her story. In *The Divine Comedy*, when Dante (the character) prepares to journey through the realm of Paradise, Beatrice arrives to replace Vergil as his guide (Barbera 171). It is precisely because of her death in *La Vita Nuova* that Beatrice can assume such a significant position in *The Divine Comedy*: she is a resident of Paradise and can act as a guide through it.

Shakespeare’s Beatrice takes on a similar role by acting as a guide through the instructions laid out in the song. As I have already mentioned above, Benedick bears a striking resemblance to the foolish men described in “Sigh No More.” Indeed, her ire toward him is understandable. Benedick is a fickle man, who can change his opinions almost at the drop of a hat (as the matchmakers prove), and Beatrice alludes to his disloyalty and past wrongdoing in the play’s first scene (1.1.60, 118). Although Beatrice may not literally sigh over these things, her interactions with Benedick certainly reflect the conflicted feelings of one who is angry with someone for whom they also care. Her first line of the play is itself representative of her conflicting feelings with regard to
Benedick. She asks the messenger, “I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no?” (1.1.25-6). On the surface, this is an insult. However, “Signor Montanto” operates as a red herring in a question with a completely different meaning. Replace “Signor Montanto” with “Benedick,” “one of Don Pedro’s men,” or even, “that guy,” and what remains is merely a question about whether a soldier has safely returned from war. Beatrice cares; she wants to know whether Benedick is alive. She is just unwilling to overtly acknowledge it. Her first line spoken to Benedick functions similarly. She interjects herself into Benedick’s and Leonato’s conversation to say, “I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks you” (1.1.95-6). Again, this speech is intended to come across as an insult, but it contradicts itself. Somebody, namely Beatrice, clearly “marks” him. The fact that she is making a comment proves that she has been listening.

Beatrice continues to play the role of the song’s addressee when male characters try in vain to deceive her. At the party, for example, she literally “sees through” Benedick’s masquerade and uses the situation to her advantage, wittily insulting Benedick to his face even as he pretends to be another partygoer. At the end of the interaction, Benedick, the would-be-deceiver, is bewildered, wondering “that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me!” (2.1.179). Beatrice, once again, has done exactly what the song said by turning the tables on Benedick, who was originally out to fool her. In a more serious situation at Hero’s wedding, Beatrice is the first to insist, “on my soul, my cousin is belied” (4.1.145). A synonym for “belied,” Shakespeare’s editor adds, is “slandered” (4.1.145n). Even before Friar Francis makes a strong case in Hero’s defense, Beatrice perceives that the events of the scene were the direct consequence of a
malicious lie. Just like the “ladies” to which the song is addressed, Beatrice does not fall for a man’s ruse very easily. The exception, one might think, would be the successful matchmaker’s scheme. However, it must be remembered that the song says nothing about the success or failure of women’s efforts to deceive, and the women of the play are the ones who successfully lie to Beatrice (even if they do so by telling a partial truth).

Like Dante’s Beatrice, Shakespeare’s Beatrice responds to these conflicted feelings and failed deceptions by shifting into a transformative mode, and her wit is her primary means of doing so. Feminine wit in Much Ado has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Cook, for example, asserts that Beatrice uses her wit to participate in the patriarchal culture of Messina (190-1). Alison Findlay, meanwhile, urges readers to consider Beatrice’s wit as a reaction against misogyny (7). Although these perspectives are useful for determining what feminine wit might mean in the context of an early modern society, they do not fully capture the most significant qualities of Beatrice’s wit as an element of the play itself. Rather, her witty remarks are creative acts that showcase her unique wisdom as a tragic character in a comedic play.

At this point, I must take a moment to address an alternate interpretation having to do with Shakespeare’s historical context that would contradict my reading of the play. Under England’s Protestant monarchs, single women could no longer join a convent in order to live a socially acceptable single life by choice. Marriage, therefore, became even more socially important for young women than previously in history (Jankowski 718). There is an instance in the play when Beatrice’s uncles Leonato and Antonio seem to suggest that her wit is to blame for her singleness, a failure in and of itself. After one of

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6 Other scholars suggest that Beatrice’s wit is a commentary on popular jestbooks of the era (Munro 91,99; Brown 8-9).
her characteristically cynical speeches about men and marriage, Leonato says, “By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.16-7). It is possible to read these lines as a paternal warning. According to such a reading, Leonato either intends to silence Beatrice’s wit because it threatens his patriarchal authority or genuinely fears that it bars her from future success as a woman because it will prevent her from finding a husband. Another line he utters later in the scene would seem to confirm this sentiment: “she mocks all her wooers out of suit” (2.1.305). It is possible to view this statement as an acknowledgment that Beatrice had plenty of chances to marry but lost them because she frightened all her suitors away with witty remarks.

However, I would argue that such a reading takes both of these lines out of their context. In the first instance, Leonato’s position in the conversation is not that of an uncle warning his niece. On the contrary, he goads her on and partakes in the witty banter:

Beatrice: Too curst is more than curst. I shall lessen God’s sending that way, for it is said God sends a curst cow short horns, but to a cow too curst he sends none.
Leonato: So by being too curst, God will send you no horns.
Beatrice: Just, if he send me no husband […]. Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face. I had rather lie in the woolen.
Leonato: You may light on a husband that hath no beard.
Beatrice: What should I do with him—dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman? (2.1.19-29)
In the first several lines of Act II, Scene 1, Leonato is the straight man to Beatrice’s comic. In this role, he responds similarly to another tirade against marriage by saying to Beatrice, “You may light on a husband that hath no beard.” According to the reading in which Leonato is condemning Beatrice’s wit, he has extraordinarily inconsistent thoughts about her future. But it cannot be the case that Leonato has suddenly changed his mind about Beatrice’s marriage prospects mid-conversation. He is merely engaging with Beatrice’s wit, bouncing her own idea of “a husband with a beard on his face” back at her to see where it leads. Taking the conversation as a whole into account, it is clear that Leonato is not condemning Beatrice’s wit but endorsing it, challenging it as one challenges an opponent in a game. In the second instance of Leonato’s seeming condemnation (“she mocks all her wooers out of suit”), he is agreeing with Don Pedro’s previous assessment of Beatrice’s character (2.1.305). In the prince’s view, she is “a pleasant-spirited lady” who “cannot endure hear tell of a husband” (2.1.299, 304). There is no causal relationship between these two statements. They are presented as two distinct characteristics. In fact, Don Pedro proposed marriage to Beatrice just moments before, attracted to her because of her wit (2.1.285, 290-2). In an alternate universe where Beatrice is a very dull person who bores all her wooers to death in monologues of disdain for marriage, the root of the problem and its consequence would remain the same. Wit and failure to marry relate to one another as form and content; the former provides a style and tone for expressing the latter. Neither one causes the other.

On the contrary, there is universal agreement in Beatrice’s community that she is wise as well as witty. The subject of her wisdom is raised on a variety of occasions by a variety of people almost as an accepted fact, indicating that singleness in and of itself
does not entail grave personal failure in this society. Claudio is arguably the most objective observer to make a comment on the subject, as one of the few upper-class characters who has no strong connection, familial or romantic, to Beatrice. As part of their matchmaking scheme, he says in Benedick’s hearing, “she is exceeding wise,” and Don Pedro adds, “In everything but in loving Benedick” (2.3.146-7). As the prince of Aragon and the play’s chief matchmaker, Don Pedro speaks with authority here. It should also be noted that the compliment paid to Beatrice is paired with an insult aimed at one of Don Pedro’s own loyal soldiers (knowingly uttered in that soldier’s hearing). The prince’s insult then reflects onto Beatrice, for she proves the fallibility of her wisdom by foolishly falling for Benedick. This is a moment of brutal honesty for Don Pedro, who refuses to acknowledge Beatrice’s exceptional wisdom without pointing out her chief flaw.

Benedick echoes Don Pedro’s half-compliment later in the scene, transforming the line into a self-deprecating joke: “They say the lady is […] wise, but for loving me. By my troth, it is no addition to her wit—nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her” (2.3.204, 206-8). In other words, the prince was right to say that loving Benedick cannot serve as evidence of Beatrice’s wit—or in this context, her intelligence—but she cannot be foolish for harboring requited love. Of course, it must be remembered that love was (and sometimes still is) considered an irrational force from outside oneself, especially in Shakespeare’s comedies. One might therefore read this running joke that Beatrice is wise “in everything but in loving Benedick” simply as a joke which bears no weight in a serious conversation about wisdom. Even so, a close reader must consider the fact that it appears twice in the play as the humorous follow-up to
complementing Beatrice’s wisdom. Even if wisdom and love were not typically connected in the cultural context, they are certainly connected by the language of Much Ado. Additionally, it is important to note that Benedick, typically Beatrice’s most ardent critic, takes a surprisingly humble stance in this moment. His own qualities as a potential suitor have nothing to do with his case for Beatrice’s wisdom, or at least for the unfoolishness of her clandestine feelings. On the contrary, he makes no defense against the implication that he is an unwise choice of husband. In doing so, he acknowledges that her wisdom is of a higher quality than his regardless of her marital status.

Furthermore, Benedick proves to be the play’s most prominent advocate not only for Beatrice’s wisdom but also for the wisdom of an alliance to her. I use the term “alliance” intentionally to emphasize the role of marriage in Elizabethan aristocratic society as a social and financial contract. This is not to say that marriages were expected to be void of love or affection. In debates about the ever-controversial wedding ring, many early modern writers supported the use of the ring precisely because it serves a symbol of the enduring, committed love which ought to exist between spouses (Cressy 342-3). But love was not the reason aristocrats married. In fact, Margaret Loftus Ranald explains that Claudio’s and Hero’s courtship is very conventional for many reasons, the most important of which is the fact that it is primarily a contractual agreement (74). We get the sense that a romantic relationship could develop over time, since Claudio finds Hero attractive and she is proud to mention her “dear Claudio” in the days leading up to the wedding (1.1.150, 3.1.92-3). However, no one is under the impression that these people are in love with each other yet; the alliance is what matters at this point.
With the historical context in mind, it is therefore important to note that Benedick is interested in Beatrice not just as a lover but as a suitor. Among his rantings against marriage early in the play, Benedick insists that wisdom is one of the most important qualities he would look for in a woman if he were ever to consider marriage (which, he insists, he will never do). He even phrases the criterion as an ultimatum: she must be “wise, or I’ll none” (2.3.27). The fact that Beatrice has so much as a chance with him later in the play is itself a good indicator that she is wise, or at least that Benedick considers her so. Once the matchmakers have interfered, bringing him around to the idea of marrying Beatrice, Benedick uses a peculiar choice of words to broach the topic with her uncle Leonato, saying, “I have studied eight or nine wise words to speak to you [Leonato] which these hobby-horses must not hear” (3.2.60-1). First, this speech acknowledges that the words Benedick has prepared are wise. Given the context of the scene, we, along with the characters witnessing the event, assume that these “eight or nine” words will comprise a request for permission to marry Beatrice (3.2.63). Therefore, Benedick’s phrasing indirectly establishes that his present endeavor and its consequences—namely, becoming Beatrice’s husband—are wise. In fact, they are so wise that they render the other characters present (including the arguably wise Don Pedro) “hobby-horses” by comparison. Shakespeare’s editor Stephen Greenblatt explains that this mild insult is the modern-day equivalent of referring to a group of people as “clowns” (3.2.61n). Paradoxically, a half-joke solidifies the seriousness of the “wise words” Benedick plans to impart, since they cannot be uttered among “these clowns” gathered in the scene. Beatrice’s fondness for wit does not disqualify her as a wise and
serious choice of wife for Benedick. On the contrary, I will suggest later on that it is her chief qualification.

The most nuanced assertion of Beatrice’s wisdom comes from her cousin Hero’s maid Ursula when they are participating in the plan to convince Benedick that Beatrice is his secret admirer and vice versa. At this point in the scene, Hero has deviated from the original matchmaking plan, using the situation as an opportunity to criticize her cousin’s incessant wit instead of praising Benedick. Redirecting the conversation to accomplish the task at hand, Ursula says to Hero:

O, do not do your cousin such a wrong.

She cannot be so much without true judgement,

Having so swift and excellent a wit

As she is prized to have, as to refuse

So rare a gentleman as Signor Benedick. (3.1.87-91)

Ursula subtly reminds Hero that it is “wrong”—both immoral and counter to their purposes—to vent her frustrations with Beatrice in these circumstances. She then reframes their discussion to focus on Beatrice’s wit as a personal strength, an indicator of “true judgement.” Beatrice’s wit—which she is “prized to have”—is itself evidence that she will be able to make the right and wise judgment, which, in this particular situation, will entail marrying Benedick.

Yet it is curious, and possibly suspicious, that Ursula would frame her wording in such a way as to suggest a causal relationship between wisdom and wit. It could be argued that this is simply another manipulation tactic as she and Hero attempt to convince Beatrice that Benedick is in love with her. And it is certainly a manipulation tactic.
Language itself is a manipulation tactic. Indeed, I hope I’m manipulating my reader at this very moment; otherwise, I would not be doing a good job as a writer. However, I would like to suggest that Ursula’s particular tactic is successful because it contains some truth. After all, the ever-cynical Beatrice is wholeheartedly convinced at the end of the scene: she believes what has been said “better than reportedly” (3.1.117). Shakespeare’s editor explains that the word “reportedly” alludes to the idea of a rumor (3.1.117n). Beatrice thoroughly understands how meaning can become garbled as language bounces from person to person. As Benedick says to her later when she turns one of his own speeches against him, “Thou hast frightened the word out of his right sense” (5.2.46).

Beatrice considers and dismisses the possibility that what she has overheard lacks credibility. Of course, we know she is mistaken. However, her mistakenness cannot be attributed to gullibility. Rather, false information (Benedick’s ardent love) has been presented in an extremely credible case. While she is building this case, Ursula takes it upon herself to repeat and validate the opinion of the community as a whole, that Beatrice is exceptionally witty and wise and that these attributes are connected.

For an early modern audience, the idea of a close relationship between wit and wisdom would not have been new. On the contrary, Francis Marbury’s *The Marriage Between Wit and Wisdom*, a play written only two decades before *Much Ado*, portrays Wit as a young man whose parents have arranged for him to marry a Miss Wisdom. In the crucial moment of the play, Irksomeness violently attacks Wit, leaving him for dead. Wisdom discovers her unconscious betrothed and heroically comes to his aid. When Wit is recovered, she implores him to do battle with Irksomeness on her behalf. Allied with Wisdom, Wit vanquishes Irksomeness (Marbury 35-8). According to this morality play,
wit is dependent upon wisdom (represented as a woman, interestingly) for success and even survival. This is not to say that Shakespeare had this play in mind when he was writing *Much Ado*. It is to say that Ursula’s suggestion of a causal relationship between wit and wisdom would have been familiar—and likely correct-sounding—to Shakespeare’s audience.

To answer the questions of why and how Beatrice’s wit and wisdom are connected in the context of *Much Ado*, I must return to the as-yet-unexamined star from the story of Beatrice’s birth. Above, I have already discussed the tragedy, pain, and sorrow wrapped up in Beatrice’s insistence that the hour of her birth was not merry; rather, her “mother cried.” Yet at the end of an otherwise tragic story, she tacks on, “But then there was a star danced, and under that I was born” (2.1.293-4). McEachern explains that the phrase “a star danced” can be interpreted either as “a shooting star” or as alluding to how “the sun was reputed to dance on Easter morning” (2.1.309n). In either case, the modern reader would be mistaken to think that the phrase refers only to a literal star, twinkling with delight (or flickering out, depending on one’s perspective). This phrase does not merely suggest celestial approval; rather, it conjures the idea of a grand heavenly celebration that bears profound meaning. Indeed, the fact that Shakespeare introduces an idea pertinent to the Christian Easter story contains extraordinary implications for the play as a whole—particularly Hero’s pseudo-death and resurrection—which could be the topic of its own paper. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is worth mentioning that Christ’s death and resurrection is itself an example of the narrative style I am discussing in the context of *Much Ado*. In it, the tragic condemnation and execution of an innocent person is creatively transformed into the birth
of a new religion. By positioning herself under a dancing star, Beatrice places herself (and therefore Shakespeare places the play) quite literally in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Of course, Shakespeare was neither the first nor the last to use the story of Christianity as a model for comedy. Indeed, many past and present-day Christian writers have attributed the historical prominence of comedy following the classical era to the cultural impact of Christ’s resurrection (Cannata 92-3). This is not to say that Shakespeare is intentionally making a theological point. But it is to say that Much Ado’s genre has very much to do with the idea of redemption. Simon Critchley draws a connection between this religious value and comedy’s role in the secular realm. As he points out, “laughter has a certain redemptive or messianic power;” it shows us how a community’s practices may “be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise” (16). I would like to expand upon Critchley’s thinking with the idea of hope.

Introducing hope to a discussion of Much Ado may seem out of place, especially in light of what some readers understand to be a problematic plot. (Although the hasty dismissiveness of the word “problematic” as it is sometimes used in literary conversation seems problematic in itself.) Of course, these readers have a valid point: where is there hope for Hero at the altar again with the same man who publicly humiliated her? My answer to this question is twofold. First, I will return to my earlier historical discussion of marriage in terms of an alliance which may or may not be accompanied by love or affection. As Ranald explains, no event in the latter half of the play releases Hero or Claudio from the contractual agreement made at the time of their betrothal (77). When Claudio refers to the bride he “must seize upon,” he is therefore expressing an awareness
of his duty to fulfill his obligation to Hero’s family, regardless of whatever his feelings might be about the matter (5.4.53). In doing so, he unknowingly saves Hero’s reputation. After all, she is out of options. Even if she were released from the betrothal, her scandalous first engagement would stand in the way of any future marriage prospects (Ranald 77). Marrying Claudio is the only available positive outcome.

In light of this historical context, the second part of my answer is that the end of *Much Ado* ultimately restores hope in marriage as a means of human connection and alliance. Hero’s resurrection is naturally a tense moment. How could it not be? Yet it serves its purpose, which is to get things back to the way they ought to be. Even as she unMASKS herself, Hero insists that she and Claudio treat each other as different people than the versions of themselves who were present at the first wedding: “And when I lived I was your other wife; / And when you loved, you were my other husband” (5.4.60-1). This wedding is their chance to start over with their original alliance intact. She goes on to insist upon being regarded as though she were reborn as a different person. To Claudio’s “Another Hero!” she replies, “Nothing certainer” (5.4.63). By distancing herself from the jilting incident, she (wittily) expresses hope in another chance at building a healthy alliance. This hope comes to fruition almost immediately, when it turns out that she and Claudio have each (independently of one another) stolen Benedick’s and Beatrice’s letters to prove that the latter couple really does love each other (5.4.85-90). The ending is happy for Hero not because of a great romance but because she and her new husband are likeminded, just as Benedick and Beatrice are in their own way.

One might even argue that in the last scene Hero has learned by Beatrice’s example to creatively control her own narrative. Indeed, powerful as it is, feminine wit is
only one of *Much Ado*’s many examples of creativity as a means of restoring a broken society. In “Sigh No More”, in Beatrice’s and Hero’s names, and even in Beatrice’s backstory, Shakespeare straddles the line between the comic and tragic. In doing so, he shows us not only the fragility of that line but also the profound importance of recognizing that the story’s genre is not predetermined. As playwright he may make a creative choice to cross it as he pleases. To do so, he first presents his audience with a broken society, where the innocent are wrongfully accused, promises go unheeded, and even ordinary likeminded people cannot build lives together. Then, with a few creative twists, he shows us how that society may be restored, and we are left with a sense of hope for stronger community bonds in Messina. For Shakespeare’s society, this points to the necessity of placing hope in individuals’ capacities to build lives with each other, at least as trusted allies if nothing more. As far as the present-day reader is concerned, the creative comedy of *Much Ado* perhaps gives us a way of thinking about restoration in our own divided, flawed community.
Chapter 2: Overcoming Rationality in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*

In the previous chapter, feminine wit and wisdom converged in the character of Beatrice from Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, revealing wit’s creative potential when it is allied with wisdom. This chapter will continue exploring these themes as they appear in Jane Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, a comedy about two sisters who are impoverished after their father’s death. One of its heroines, Elinor Dashwood, is a character of judgment but not of wit, whose attempts to remain rational and composed often put her in a position of passivity and self-delusion. As I will discuss in greater detail in the subsequent chapter on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, evidence from Austen’s letters and published prayers indicate that she likely viewed wit as a precarious trait, since it can be easily weaponized to mock or hurt others. As Austen herself wrote to her niece Fanny, “wisdom is better than wit, and in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side” (*Letters* 441). Based on this information alone, one would think that Elinor embodies some of Austen’s ideals, but Austen does not portray her heroine as such. On the contrary, Elinor’s judgment is both a strength and a weakness, but it almost always manifests as performed passivity, a striving for composure comparable to her sister Marianne’s striving for discomposure. In this chapter, I will suggest that Elinor ultimately grows to embody Austen’s idea of a wise woman *in spite of* confining herself to the use of judgment in all of her actions. Elinor’s and Marianne’s characters are both flawed by their saturation in particular philosophies: empiricism and sensibility. Through these characters, Austen depicts the relationship between rational truth and emotional truth.
as two equally important components of wisdom and as models for reconciling conflicting strands of political thought.

Though rationality is often considered the most significant component of wisdom, Austen’s depiction of Elinor Dashwood draws attention to the distinctions between the two qualities. From the outset, Elinor is a voice of reason for her friends and family. As she is introduced, we are told that “Elinor, this eldest daughter whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother” (Austen, Sense 8). This description occurs as the narrator explains how the Dashwood daughters have been overlooked in their great-uncle’s will, which mandates that their half-brother John inherit everything upon their father’s death (see family tree below). Despite a promise to his late father that he will provide for his stepmother and half-sisters, John is influenced by his greedy wife Fanny to make minimal arrangements for the Dashwood women’s future. In this stressful time, it is not Mrs. Dashwood but Elinor who chooses a house they will be able to afford. In fact, we are told that Elinor’s “steadier judgment rejected several houses as too large for their income, which her mother would have approved” (16). The phrasing draws attention to Elinor’s active role in her family’s decision-making process. Earlier, we were told that she is her mother’s “counsellor,” but it is clear from this example that Elinor has greater influence over family decisions than one would expect. In light of this, Deborah Weiss also notes that Elinor’s thinking tends to reflect Enlightenment-era empiricism, prioritizing known facts—such as how much a house costs—above her emotions (257-8). In the first dilemma of choosing a house to live in after their father’s death, Elinor demonstrates her ability to set her feelings aside and
focus on the facts. Her judgment is an asset to her family, especially in a time of grief and transition.

However, the question of the new house is difficult for Elinor individually since its consequence could easily be the premature end of her budding romance with Fanny’s brother Edward Ferrars. The timing of Elinor’s and Edward’s almost-courtship is inconvenient, since the Henry Dashwoods and John Dashwoods cannot tolerate their shared living arrangements much longer. Therefore, the matters of the financial situation, family conflict, and new romance intersect when Elinor finally gives her approval on a new house, the location of which is a considerable distance from Norland (and Edward). This is the first of Elinor’s many self-sacrifices throughout the novel. Indeed, the narrator’s language highlights her self-abnegation:

“The house […] was on so simple a scale, and the rent so uncommonly moderate, as to leave her [Elinor] no right of objection on either point; and, therefore, though it was not a plan which brought any charm to her fancy, though it was a removal from the vicinity of Norland beyond her wishes, she made no attempt to dissuade her mother from sending her letter of acquiescence.” (Austen, Sense 26)

Elinor has plenty of objections to the house. In fact, we are told that the change of life it will entail is completely charmless for her. Having already lost her father, her childhood home, and an heiress’s lifestyle, Elinor must now lose access to the friend and possible marriage prospect she has found in Edward. Even so, she believes she has “no right of objection” in any of these matters because the family unit’s needs must come first. As Karen Valihora observes, Sense and Sensibility’s exposition “insists that private interests are, paradoxically, best served when they are subordinated to those of the public good,
just as individual characters work best when they further the ends of the whole, the work
of art” (195). By forfeiting her personal objections to the move in favor of her family’s
needs, Elinor herself benefits as a member of her family. This moral code is based upon
an understanding that the collective need to leave Norland is greater than her individual
desire to remain there.

The morality that Valihora describes is evident in Jane Austen’s letters. One
particularly interesting passage is written to Austen’s sister Cassandra upon the death of
their sister-in-law, the mother of their niece Fanny. In it, Austen describes her “hope that
our dear Fanny’s sense of duty to that beloved father will rouse her to exertion. For his
sake, and as the most acceptable proof of love to the spirit of her departed mother, she
will try to be tranquil and resigned” (Austen, Letters 164). Austen hoped that Fanny
would be like Elinor when facing the death of a parent, dutifully suppressing her
individual feelings to spare those of her family. And Sense and Sensibility’s exposition is
consistent with this thinking. In the context of the initial family crisis, Elinor’s sense of
familial duty is indispensable. Based on the evidence found in Austen’s letters, it seems
that the author would have approved of such a sacrifice during a temporary period of

For historical context, we can turn to one of Austen’s favorite sermon-writers,
Thomas Sherlock7, who wrote on keeping one’s emotions and desires in check as a
beneficial practice. According to Sherlock, “the Motions and Operations of the Heart are
in great measure under our own Power and Government” (381). Sherlock does not
anticipate any controversy on this point. On the contrary, Sherlock states that it is “a

7 Austen wrote to her niece Anna, “I am very fond of Sherlock’s sermons and prefer them to almost any”
(Letters 434).
plain Case [...] We find daily that we can check our Passions and Inclinations to serve the Purposes of this life” (397). Sherlock does not expect his reader to have difficulty grasping his concept. To him, it is obvious that individuals must set their feelings aside fairly often in favor of what is right or reasonable, and he regards this as a good thing. Of course, we cannot be sure that Austen agreed with all of Sherlock’s sermons, but she must have considered an idea that was featured in his work. Indeed, Elinor seems to embody Sherlock’s vision of a heart “under the government” of judgment.

However, Austen’s letters also indicate a belief that the heart should overrule judgment in certain circumstances. In November 1814, Fanny wrote to Austen about a difficult decision she would have to make: whether or not to accept the imminent marriage proposal of her suitor “Mr. A.” In this epistolary conversation, Austen is sure to mention the many ways in which Mr. A is an ideal prospect for Fanny: he is “the eldest son of a man of fortune, the near relation of [Fanny’s] particular friend, and belonging to [her] own county” (Austen, Letters 440). Money, status, and convenience are all to be gained from marrying Mr. A., but Austen’s emphasis is always that Fanny’s heart must guide her in this matter. Austen wrote, “you must not let anything depend on my opinion; your own feelings, and none but your own, should determine such an important point” (454). In this case, Austen urges her niece to prioritize emotion even above sound advice. Considering Austen’s and Sherlock’s writing together, it is clear that Austen’s opinions on the role of rational deduction in decision-making are complex.

Austen’s depiction of Elinor’s judgment is similarly nuanced in Sense and Sensibility. Even in the exposition, it becomes evident that Elinor does not simply limit

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8 This letter also features a brief discussion of Mr. A.’s religious beliefs, which will become relevant in my next chapter.
her outward emotionality; she lies to herself about what she feels. The earliest example of this occurs when she first develops romantic feelings for Edward at Norland. Elinor’s ever-sentimental sister Marianne confronts her about the matter, determined to learn the truth of the feelings that Elinor refuses to admit even to herself. Elinor replies:

‘I do not attempt to deny […] that I think very highly of him—that I greatly esteem, that I like him.’

Marianne here burst forth with indignation—

‘Esteem him! Like him! Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh! Worse than cold-hearted! Ashamed of being otherwise. Use those words again and I shall leave the room at this moment.’

Elinor could not help laughing. ‘Excuse me,’ said she, ‘and be assured that I meant no offense to you, by speaking, in so quiet a way, of my own feelings. Believe them to be stronger than I have declared; believe them, in short, to be as much as his merit, and the suspicion—the hope of his affection for me may warrant’ (23).

It is evident here that Elinor’s judgment is in conflict with her emotions, and rightfully so, given her difficult circumstances. That said, a careful reader should side with Marianne in this particular argument about the truth of Elinor’s feelings. As overdramatic and immature as she sounds, Marianne understands that Elinor is lying to herself. Indeed, like an unreliable witness, Elinor cannot keep her story straight, rearticulating her regard for Edward three times. Marianne has the sense to see through the artifice, incredulously repeating Elinor’s language, “Esteem him! Like him!” By the end of the exchange, Marianne has so lawyerly deposed her sister that the latter is willing
to completely change her claim, forcing Elinor to finally admit that she harbors not just “suspicion” but also “hope” that Edward requites her feelings.

One might even argue that this scene is a nod to the practical value of the Cult of Sensibility as a means of confronting complex or inconvenient emotions. In the Eighteenth Century, “sensibility” was a term that was used to describe “cultivated emotion or the capacity for it” (Todd 17). Especially prevalent in representations of women, the Cult of Sensibility was a complex phenomenon, which sometimes stood for ideal femininity and, at other times, for weakness or narcissism. As Jacqueline Labbe eloquently puts it, “The body of scholarship on sensibility reveals that sensibility can go wrong, or it can go right. There is no one ‘sensibility, ’ but rather types or strains (just as there are good and bad bacteria)” (356). In most cases, Marianne’s sensibility is the kind that goes wrong; Labbe herself considers it to be a “disease” from which Marianne will never recover (358). However, this conversation about Edward is one instance in which Marianne’s sensibility has given her an advantage over her sister.

Yet there is one odd episode in which Elinor indulges in sensibility. Marianne catches Edward wearing a ring that contains a lock of hair, leading Elinor to make the absurd assumption that he has somehow snuck up behind her and snipped a lock of her hair off without her realizing it. The fact that Elinor would imagine such a thing has all sorts of historical, cultural, and literary implications. Weiss, for example, interprets this scene as a statement on the fallibility of empirical reasoning (265). Though I agree with Weiss, it is more in line with the purposes of this chapter to emphasize the consequences

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9 Stealing a woman’s lock of hair would have invoked a complicated set of courtship rules (Zohn par. 8). The scene is also reminiscent of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, which Austen would have certainly read as a self-proclaimed fan of Pope (Bristow 36).
of empiricism’s failure. Flattered at the thought that the lock of hair is hers, “she [Elinor] internally resolved henceforward to catch every opportunity of eyeing the hair and of satisfying herself, beyond all doubt, that it was exactly the shade of her own” (Austen, Sense 96). For once, Elinor revels in irrationality, and it delights her. By catching glimpses of the hair whenever she can, she intentionally rediscovers what she believes to be a dream come true: certainty that Edward requites her affection but is unable to declare his love for fear that his overbearing mother will disinherit him. This is wildly out of character for Elinor, not just because her powers of deduction fail her but also because she is happy. Here, we see the limitations of reason when it is pitted against desire.

It does not take long for Elinor to return to her normal habit of suppressing her feelings and deluding herself. Lovesick again after Edward’s visit has come to an end, Elinor is filled with “determination to subdue [her feelings]” (Austen, Sense 101). This determination must puzzle a careful reader. It is not as though burying her feelings is Elinor’s natural inclination; if that were the case, no determination would be necessary. Unlike the situation at Norland, her feelings would have no impact on convenience or practical concerns here. On the contrary, in a rural community before the invention of television, a family discussion about the intriguing developments in Elinor’s romance would probably be helpful for passing the time. Indeed, the subsequent paragraph describes Elinor seeking out other ways to entertain herself throughout the day: “Elinor sat at her drawing-table as soon as he [Edward] was out of the house, busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his name, appeared to interest herself as much as ever in the general concerns of the family” (102). It is
important to note that even though Elinor is “busily employed” (at least outwardly), we know that she is not successfully suppressing her thoughts and feelings. After all, she only “appears” to be invested in drawing. Again, Austen highlights a disconnect between Elinor’s external performance and her inner life. The real project of the entire day has been not to think about Edward, not to appear interested in Edward, and not to avoid mentioning Edward. Paradoxically, Elinor must actively work to perform passivity.

Of course, Elinor has enough sense to invent a rational-seeming explanation for her behavior, and Austen gives us a window into this explanation. Elinor assures herself that, “if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase, and her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account” (Austen, Sense 102). The last clause of this quote is another instance in which Elinor is described acting exactly as Austen hoped Fanny would in a time of distress. The heroine is concealing her feelings so that she will not be emotionally burdensome to her family. However, in the first two clauses, Elinor is deluded. She acknowledges her “grief,” but then congratulates herself on taking preventative action against its “unnecessary increase.” As intelligent as Elinor sounds, this is nonsense. Why would grief increase unnecessarily? What is the necessary degree of grief? It is also important to note that Elinor is taking action here, even if that action’s consequence is the appearance of passivity.

To fully understand what Elinor is trying to accomplish in this case, we may consider Marianne’s overwrought heartbreak later on as the opposite extreme, the behavior that Elinor is striving to avoid. When she learns that her beau Willoughby has betrayed her, Marianne weeps, declaring, “Mine is a misery which nothing can do away”
This is balderdash. Willoughby is not Marianne’s one true love, and her heartbreak will heal with time. However, Marianne’s lamentations are just as nonsensical as Elinor’s idea that grief can be micromanaged to spare her family distress. Both sisters react to their respective circumstances as though they must choose between one extreme or another; there is no concept of balance or of adjusting emotional responses as appropriate to the situation.

To fully address the significance of the extremes of emotionality which Elinor and Marianne represent, I must take a moment to address the significance of their names to readers of Austen’s time. Born in 1775, Austen lived and wrote in the time of French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Cousin and sister-in-law to a guillotined Frenchman’s widow and sister to two naval officers, she witnessed these historical events play out through her family life (Butler par. 1, 2, 38). Consequently, she would have almost certainly known that the French Revolutionaries had replaced the Virgin Mary with “a female figure of liberty” called Marianne (Doody xv). Meanwhile, “Elinor” is a variant of “Eleanor,” a name shared by three medieval English queens, another subject Austen would have known well as a student and satirist of English history (Butler par. 17). Interestingly, the latest reigning of the three, Eleanor of Castile, was the consort of King Edward I. Though their marriage was politically motivated, the couple is reputed to have grown very close, so much so that their contemporaries held the queen suspect, convinced that Edward carried out his strict rule under her influence (Parsons par. 4). One might even make a case for the “i” in the unusually spelled “Elinor” to have some connection with the Roman numeral “I” in “Edward I.” However far one wishes to take
the details of these parallels, Austen has clearly aligned the Dashwood sisters with different strains of political thought, one revolutionary and one monarchical.

Indeed, these political affiliations are highly appropriate for each character, especially in terms of their different ways of facing adversity. A revolutionary is someone who, like Marianne, makes their grievances known to the world. A good monarch\textsuperscript{10} sets aside their grievances so they can bear their people’s, as Elinor does often. Indeed, this is a tension-filled issue in the sisters’ relationship: neither can understand the other’s way of dealing with difficult situations. This unresolved conflict comes to a boiling point when Willoughby breaks Marianne’s heart, reducing her to a puddle of tears, while Elinor is fed up with her dramatics:

"Exert yourself, dear Marianne," she [Elinor] cried, "if you would not kill yourself and all who love you. Think of your mother; think of her misery while you suffer: for her sake you must exert yourself."

"I cannot, I cannot," cried Marianne; "leave me, leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me! but do not torture me so. Oh! how easy for those, who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion! Happy, happy Elinor, you cannot have an idea of what I suffer."

"Do you call me happy, Marianne? Ah! if you knew! — And can you believe me to be so, while I see you so wretched!" (Austen, Sense 176).

Neither sister can understand what the other is trying to say. It is as though they are speaking in different languages. Elinor can only speak in terms family, duty, and self-sacrifice. Marianne must weep and firmly believes that anyone in distress must do the

\textsuperscript{10} “Good” is the keyword here, since George III and IV ruled during Austen’s lifetime.
same. Elinor cannot understand how her sister can be so selfish, and Marianne cannot understand how Elinor can be so unfeeling.

One may also consider this scene in terms of primogeniture, the system upon which everything in *Sense and Sensibility* hinges. Such a perspective is especially necessary if we are to consider Elinor to be a representative of the monarchy, or at least the traditional worldview on which the institution is founded. Typically, primogeniture is discussed in terms of the firstborn son’s extremely privileged position, certainly acknowledged in *Sense and Sensibility* by John Dashwood’s all-consuming inheritance. The other component of this system is the fact that the heir will never be the personal owner of his inheritance; instead, he is the steward of what collectively belongs to his ancestors and descendants. As Lord Grantham eloquently explains to his daughter in BBC’s *Downton Abbey*, “My fortune is the work of others, who labored to build a great dynasty. Do I have the right to destroy their work, or impoverish that dynasty? I am a custodian, my dear, not an owner. I must strive to be worthy of the task I have been set.” (“Episode 4”). In the context of the English monarchy, the same idea is explained in terms of the king’s two bodies. Though the king is a mortal person with a “Body natural,” the “soul” of kingship, the “Body politic,” lives on in his heirs (Kantorowicz 9, 13). In other words, the heir must sacrifice some of his individuality to carry the immense weight of a legacy on behalf of the generations before and after him. His existence is forever bound to his inheritance, and, like Elinor, he actively strives to perform a role that is defined by passivity as he waits to take the place of a predecessor.

Austen provides a perfect example of this phenomenon in Edward, a firstborn son under extraordinary pressure to embody his family legacy in a way that his mother deems
acceptable. Interestingly, he struggles most with being a gentleman of no profession. He has always wanted to pursue the clergy, a career path which falls below his family’s standards since it is typically designated for younger sons, who needed to make a living of their own (Drum 96, 97). Instead, the Ferrars pronounce “idleness […] on the whole to be the most advantageous and honorable” (Austen, Sense 101). Consequently, Edward has spent his entire young adulthood in search of ways to pass the time. Of course, the Ferrars do not realize that this course of action (or inaction) has completely backfired. Fanny Dashwood makes it clear to her in-laws that Edward is also expected “to marry well,” and she even threatens Elinor by alluding to “the danger attending any young woman who attempted to draw him in” (24, original italics). Of course, we find out later that Edward was “drawn in” long ago by his secret fiancée Lucy Steele (who is of even lower social status than Elinor). As Edward himself describes his teenage years, “I had […] nothing in the world to do, but to fancy myself in love” (337). Edward failed to perform passivity. This imprudent secret engagement ultimately costs him his inheritance, which is in fact his happy ending. When he is disinherited, Edward can cease performing idleness; he is allowed to live, work, and marry as though he were a younger son.

Though she is certainly not an heiress, Elinor’s allegorical ties to primogeniture are evident in her relationship with Edward. In one moment during Edward’s visit to Barton Cottage, she indulges in a brief reverie, envisioning the impossible circumstances in which Edward would be able to court and marry her:

She would have been glad to know when these difficulties were to cease, this opposition was to yield,—when Mrs. Ferrars would be reformed, and her son at
liberty to be happy. But from such vain wishes, she was forced to turn for comfort to the renewal of her confidence in Edward’s affection, to the remembrance of every mark of regard in look or word which fell from him […] (Austen, *Sense* 100)

As always, Elinor is caught between her emotions and her reason, but she is not self-deluded here. Elinor catches herself in a daydream and dismisses her desires as “vain wishes.” Rejecting fantasy and accepting reality, Elinor again subscribes to the philosophy that sometimes contributes to and at other times detracts from her judgment. As she does so, it is important to note that this entire quotation is written in the passive voice. Elinor hopes that “Mrs. Ferrars would be reformed,” not that she would decide to change. Edward may one day be “at liberty to be happy,” but even in daydreams he is not seeking happiness. This fantasy is just as much about the system in which Edward is trapped as it is about Elinor’s wishes. Because she is in love with an eldest son, even actively dreamed-up ideal scenarios are framed in passive terms.

That said, Elinor’s passivity should not be confused with weakness. Indeed, she shows profound strength of character when facing difficult moral situations. Other characters recognize this quality in her, which is why she is so often chosen as a confidante. At different moments, Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood, Colonel Brandon, and even Willoughby share their secrets with her and expect sound advice in return. Even when Marianne finally learns about Edward’s engagement, Elinor is still playing the role of the trusted confidante. The narrator tells us that “Marianne listened with horror, and cried excessively. Elinor was to be the comforter of others in her own distresses, no less than in theirs” (Austen, *Sense* 245). This is especially the case when
Elinor gives her word that she would keep Lucy’s secret, so she will do so, painful though it will be. As the narrator informs us, “She was stronger alone, and her own good sense so well supported her, that her firmness was as unshaken, her appearance of cheerfulness as invariable, as with regrets so poignant and so fresh, it was possible for them to be” (135). Austen uses words that could just as easily describe a rock: “stronger,” “supported,” “firmness,” “unshaken,” “invariable.” Indeed, a rock is an apt metaphor for Elinor’s role in *Sense and Sensibility*. She is capable of withstanding incredible amounts of pressure but powerless to manipulate her circumstances.

Elinor’s lack of agency is made especially clear when she first meets her witty rival, Lucy Steele. In their interactions, it is as though Austen is carrying out a scientific experiment, seeing what happens when one woman of wit and another of judgment are rivals. This is especially clear when Lucy reveals that she is secretly engaged to Edward, extinguishing Elinor’s hopes for a future with him. To add insult to injury, Lucy tortures Elinor with cunning mind games, often transforming the latter’s judgment into a weakness. In one instance, Lucy claims to seek advice from Elinor on whether she should break off her engagement:

“[…] But you will not give me your advice, Miss Dashwood?”

“No;” answered Elinor, with a smile, which concealed very agitated feelings, “on such a subject I certainly will not. You know very well that my opinion would have no weight with you, unless it were on the side of your wishes.”

“Indeed you wrong me,” replied Lucy with great solemnity; “I know nobody of whose judgment I think so highly as I do of yours; and I do really believe, that if you was to say to me, ‘I advise you by all means to put an end to your
engagement with Edward Ferrars, it will be more for the happiness of both of you,’ I should resolve upon doing it immediately.” (Austen, Sense 143)

The description of Elinor’s smile draws attention to the incongruity between her outward performance and inner life, indicating that she is again setting her feelings aside and relying on her judgment. Here, that involves allowing Edward’s and her almost-courtship to remain an elephant in the room. Indeed, Elinor believes she remains invulnerable when she gives voice to the fundamental principle underlying their conversation: the fact that Lucy and Edward are engaged, and no one can do anything about it except Lucy. By refusing to give advice, Elinor is essentially saying, “This is a trap, and I know better than to fall for it.” In other words, each party is able to read the other’s reading of themselves.

Lucy’s answer, however, reveals that Elinor’s judgment is a vulnerability in this situation. Like an adept chess-player, Lucy has anticipated all of Elinor’s possible moves. Posing as an impartial confidante, Elinor has made herself out to be Lucy’s ideal advisor. But Lucy does not need advice. She already knows that a good advisor would say the very thing that would blow Elinor’s cover: “Lucy, you should break off the engagement.” All this talk of Elinor’s judgment is just pretext for what is really Lucy’s territorial claim on Edward, her secret fiancé of five years. Elinor retreats, claiming that she cannot pass judgment as an indifferent party (a blatant lie). Lucy refutes her adversary with ease, simultaneously making an unspoken claim to knowledge: “’Tis

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11 When a man asked a woman to marry him in Austen’s time, he essentially promised to provide for her for the rest of her life. This being the case, it would have been possible for Edward to break the engagement, but to do so would have been considered morally wrong. Technically, Lucy would have had grounds to sue him under English law (Mullan xvi).

12 This idea is also known as Theory of Mind.
because you are an indifferent person,’ said Lucy, with some pique, laying a particular stress on those words, ‘that your judgment might justly have such weight with me’ (Austen, Sense 144, italics added). Here, we see an example of wit’s linguistic quality. Lucy has found a way to acknowledge the elephant in the room without actually naming it by playing with the different meanings of the word “indifferent.” On the surface, Lucy is playing along with Elinor’s charade, supposedly acknowledging that the latter is indifferent in the sense of impartiality. However, Lucy also uses the word “indifferent” to make it clear that Elinor is “of no consequence or matter” to the engagement (Oxford English Dictionary). In doing so, Lucy has successfully communicated a complicated idea to her rival. She knows that her engagement has outlasted her relationship with her fiancé, who is now in love with Elinor. But even if Edward’s heart is Elinor’s, his future is still Lucy’s, and Elinor can be nothing but an inconsequential third party. Elinor does not respond; she has been outwitted. At this point, it seems as though Austen has proven that when a woman of wit is pitted against a woman of judgment, the former comes out on top.

However, as the novel nears its conclusion, it becomes clear that both Lucy and Elinor get exactly what they want. But the outcome has nothing to do with Elinor’s judgment. From Elinor’s perspective, it is a pure stroke of luck that Lucy rejects Edward and marries his brother Robert instead. Elinor cannot understand how this has happened. We are told that “To her own heart it was a delightful affair, to her imagination it was even a ridiculous one, but to her reason, her judgment, it was completely a puzzle” (Austen, Sense 336). Elinor’s source of happiness is a situation which baffles her. Indeed, Austen places her in a position such that she must admit that her reason has been
conquered, try as she might to explain the Ferrars’ thoughts and actions. The story of her future marriage will hinge upon a series of conjectures. Judgment is useless in these circumstances.

On the contrary, Lucy’s wit solves Elinor’s problem. Her ability to manipulate language—and therefore people—was equally useful for keeping and losing her claim on Edward depending on what suited her purposes at the time. Edward himself notes this as he discusses the matter with Elinor: he “could only attempt an explanation by supposing, that perhaps at first accidentally meeting, the vanity of the one [Robert] had been so worked on by the flattery of the other [Lucy], as to lead by degrees to all the rest” (Austen, *Sense* 339). And the narrator confirms his theory when it is explained that Lucy’s relationship with Robert changed when, “Instead of talking of Edward, they came eventually to talk only of Robert,—a subject on which he had always more to say than on any other, and in which she soon betrayed an interest even equal to his own” (350). Lucy has all the agency here. Even upon their “first accidental meeting,” Lucy perceived how Robert might be susceptible to manipulation, and initially hoped to use this opportunity to gain favor with the Ferrars family. Then, realizing the depth of Robert’s vanity and gullibility, she wittily found ways to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. Lucy is a schemer, but her schemes are self-interested, not necessarily malicious, as Austen’s narrator explains:

The whole of Lucy’s behaviour in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently
obstructed, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience. (Austen, *Sense* 349-50)

In this case, the witty woman is *amoral* but not *anti*-moral. She does not wish others ill, but she will always pursue her own interests. It is this relentless self-interest that allows everyone involved to get what they want. This is not to say that Austen is promoting amorality or selfishness. *It is* to say that she is highlighting a nuance. Wit is not a virtue, but it can be useful. In comparison, Elinor’s judgment is fairly limiting. As we have already seen, Elinor performs passivity to promote others’ happiness; she never even considers a possible situation in which she, Edward, and Lucy might all be happy.

However, much like Edward and primogeniture itself, Elinor cannot go on with this performance indefinitely. The scene of the discovery that Edward is no longer engaged to Lucy Steele is a coup de grâce for Elinor’s composure. In the moments leading up to his arrival, she demands of herself, “*I will* be calm; *I will* be mistress of myself” (Austen, *Sense* 333). Once again, Elinor actively commands herself to take on a passive role. Of course, her fervor makes it clear that she is not composed in the slightest, leaving us unconvinced that she will actually be able to maintain this performance. When Edward reveals that Lucy has married his brother Robert, the floodgates open: “Elinor could sit no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease” (335). Weeping and running around the room, Elinor is behaving like Marianne. For the first time, both sisters are embracing sensibility.

In fact, Elinor and Marianne *both* get happy endings by exchanging roles. As we have already seen, Elinor must embrace both individualism and irrationality to marry the
person she loves. She must also actively discompose her future in-laws by marrying their son against their wishes. Consequently, the funds available to support Elinor’s and Edward’s lives as a married couple will be minimal. Elinor’s is exactly the kind of romantic situation over which Marianne would have sighed early in the novel. Meanwhile, it is Marianne who goes on to have an uneventful, sensible courtship with Colonel Brandon. It is she who becomes the more passive figure in the end by agreeing to a marriage which her family collectively believes is suitable for her. Though Marianne considers Brandon’s personal qualities before she agrees to the match, her motivation is primarily political, and Austen describes the union in political terms. By paying visits to Brandon’s home with Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood is described as “acting on motives of policy” (Austen, *Sense* 351). Mrs. Dashwood, Edward, and Elinor ultimately form a “confederacy against her [Marianne]” so that Marianne feels some familial pressure to marry Brandon (351). This is not to say that Marianne’s is an unhappy or loveless marriage. The narrator assures us that “Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (352). The Brandons’ relationship is founded upon the old idea of marriage as a social and financial agreement in which romantic love is hoped for but not prioritized.\(^\text{13}\) Returning to the political allegory, this conclusion casts Elinor as the rebel who overthrows the Ferrars family and Marianne as the wife and future mother upon whom primogeniture depends.

The wisdom of this conclusion is not that Elinor rejects her judgment or that Marianne condemns sensibility. Rather, both sisters have been forced into a position

\(^{13}\) See the previous chapter for an in-depth explanation of this concept in the context of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. 
where they can no longer confine themselves to either sense or sensibility. They need to embrace both qualities to understand and live with each other. Though it is important both economically and relationally that the characters have successful marriages, the novel’s thematic solution is the establishment of a harmonious sisterly relationship. *Sense and Sensibility*’s last words are especially revealing on this point. We are told that “among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands” (353). It is important to note that Austen is using many negative statements to explain the sisters’ relationship as married women. We are not told that they always agree; they merely avoid disagreement. Their husbands are not best friends, but neither do they treat each other with “coolness.” In other words, the two couples get along.

In terms of the political allegory, this conclusion would suggest that monarchists and revolutionaries can learn from each other. There are certain points on which they will never agree, but perfect agreement is not necessary. Understanding one another is necessary. Elinor must relate to irrationality and emotionality as beneficial under certain circumstances. Marianne must grasp the reason one might take on a passive role for the collective good of one’s family. Mutually equipped with knowledge of each other’s experience, the sisters are able to build positive relationships between their two households. It is also important to note that wit is only involved insofar as Lucy’s interference created the circumstances in which these relationships could develop. The
continuance of social harmony depends on Elinor and Marianne nurturing both rationality and emotional intelligence since, in Austen’s view, both are necessary for wisdom.

Dashwood/Ferrars Family Tree

**The Dashwoods**

- Original Owner of Norfield
- Younger son

**The Ferrars**

- First wife=Henry Dashwood=Mrs. Dashwood
- Edward, Robert
- Fanny=John Dashwood
- Elinor, Marianne, Margaret
- Harry
Chapter 3: “It’s Not About ‘Deserve’”: Jane Austen’s Religion and Feminine Wit in

*Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen is well-known for her witty heroines. She is not well-known for her faith, but perhaps she should be. Evidence abounds in her letters and published prayers that Christianity was a significant part of her life. An Anglican clergyman’s daughter, she writes of praying for her siblings in times of hardship, and her last recorded words (according to her sister Cassandra) were “pray for me” (*Letters* 162, 520). Meanwhile, she is certainly known for her portrayal of a society that obsessively evaluates individuals’ worth based on hierarchies of class, beauty, morality, and intelligence. The situations of Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, clearly illustrate these hierarchies in action. Elizabeth, second of five sisters, will be impoverished after her father’s death if she remains single. Emma, the heiress of Hartfield estate, has already achieved an incredible degree of independence for a woman of her time. However, few pieces of scholarship examine Austen’s religious beliefs in relation to her novels and characters. By examining these witty heroines, I intend to show that Austen’s Christianity, specifically the notions of grace and community, not only influence *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* but also serve as a solution to her heroines’ moral and social problems. In other words, Austen’s religion and her ideas about secular communities do not belong to separate spheres; on the contrary, I intend to show that a religious perspective allows Austen to depict fictional secular communities as fulfilling spiritual as well as practical needs.
With Christianity at the forefront of my argument, it is important to acknowledge that the Anglican church was at a significant turning point during Austen’s lifetime as the Anglican Evangelical movement grew in England. Up until this period, matters of doctrine had not been at the forefront of church history and identity; rather, “controversies had focused primarily on church order and authority” (Chapman 60). The church’s doctrinal emphasis had been the fulfillment of “obligations—a sincere attempt to obey the law of Christ—in other words, the practice of holiness and good works” (Smith 70). The Evangelical movement objected to this emphasis on obligation. In this new Anglican sect, “grace was offered to all” (Atkins 454). For an Anglican Evangelical, therefore, accepting the offer of God’s grace was the point of most importance, not working to earn it (Chapman 62).

It is impossible to know Austen’s precise stances on the teachings of her church, since her surviving letters rarely include overtly stated religious opinions; however, the clues we have at our disposal indicate a shift in her leanings during the time that *Pride and Prejudice* was published. In 1809, she wrote to Cassandra, “I do not like the evangelicals” (Austen, *Letters* 229). Then, in 1814—only a year after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*—she wrote to her niece Fanny, “I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be evangelicals, and am at least persuaded that they who are so from reason and feeling must be happiest and safest” (*Letters* 441). Clearly, during the time she was preparing to publish her novel, her thinking was changing with respect to Anglican Evangelical notions and beliefs, and the emphasis on grace could easily have played a role in this change.
Additionally, Austen left clues to her religious views when she praised (and criticized) the collected sermons of famous clergymen in her letters. Among these clergymen, her favorite appears to have been Thomas Sherlock (Letters 434). Only a brief perusal of Sherlock’s works is required to grasp the importance of unearned grace in his theology. One of his sermons (on Psalm 8:4) opens, “When we consider the Care of Providence over the Children of Men, as it is manifested either in the Works of Nature or of Grace, we naturally fall into the Reflection of the Text, and wonder to see so much done for Men, who seem to have no Merit or Desert equal to the Concern shewed for them” (307). Of course, these are not Austen’s words, and there is no guarantee that she agreed with every phrase in Sherlock’s writing. However, as Laura Mooneyham points out, “The most defining mark of Austen’s [published] prayers […] comes in her awareness of human fault, particularly her own, and the commensurate greatness of God’s mercy” (72). In short, we have a plethora of good indicators that grace was a subject of importance to Austen, that it carried weight in the historical moment of her church, informed her worldview, and therefore influenced her authorial choices.

_The Oxford English Dictionary_ defines “grace” as “a quality of God: benevolence towards humanity, bestowed freely and without regard to merit, and which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation.” For the purposes of this chapter, I am going to focus on three qualities of grace outlined here: grace is not merited, it is bestowed, and its outcome is blessings and salvation. With this in mind, I will begin my analysis of Austen’s witty heroines by looking at the ways in which they do not merit their happy endings. Elizabeth Bennet and her family are quite hopeless. In fact, the Bennets’ hopelessness is the real problem of the story.
I intentionally choose the broad term “hopeless” to describe their state because their failure is multi-faceted; it has both social and moral components. Morally, Mr. Bennet does not behave with consideration for his wife and daughters. In the novel’s first scene, the reader witnesses Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s dysfunctional relationship in action. In one fell swoop, Mr. Bennet refuses to acknowledge his wife, disparages his daughters, and unashamedly declares Elizabeth to be his favorite child (Austen, *Pride* 2-3). On top of this poor example for domestic life, Mr. Bennet has created all the economic predicaments his daughters face and has therefore failed them socially. Without dowries or an inheritance, the Bennet girls must marry or live in poverty in the aftermath of their father’s inevitable death. Garcia Fay Ellwood expounds further upon Mr. Bennet’s failures, drawing attention to how he “lives almost entirely for his own present pleasures” (par. 1). Though Ellwood only intends to comment on Mr. Bennet, long-term thinking does not seem to be a strength for any member of the Bennet household, with the possible exception of Mrs. Bennet, the only person who is concerned about what will happen after the Bennet patriarch dies. But she cannot control her family’s finances, and her failings are different.

Mrs. Bennet’s failing—both social and moral—is her own lack of propriety and failure to consider others. Robert Irvine explains the notion of propriety as it existed in Austen’s era as a means of pleasant social interaction between members of different classes, specifically to bridge the gap between new and old money. To follow propriety, one “excluded certain subjects (such as religion or politics) which might lead to pain and insult […] that would in turn open up or reveal those particular social divisions that it was the job of polite society to heal” (Irvine 12). In other words,
social success depended upon a moral attribute: the conscious effort to treat others with respect and consider their perspectives, or charity. In many instances, Mrs. Bennet does not exhibit charity. In one particular moment, she cannot resist boasting about her eldest daughter Jane’s new courtship to her neighbor Lady Lucas. *Pride and Prejudice*’s narrator assures us that “She concluded with many good wishes that Lady Lucas might soon be equally fortunate, though evidently and triumphantly believing there was no chance of it” (Austen, *Pride* 67). The key to this moment is that Lady Lucas’s own daughter is on the brink of spinsterhood. One acting with propriety toward her would avoid reminding her of her own daughter’s unfortunate situation—let alone gloat as Mrs. Bennet does over the imminent marriage of a daughter—because doing so would cause pain.

Although Mrs. Bennet “married up” into the gentry, it would be a mistake to attribute these qualities to the class into which she was born. Her maiden name “Gardiner” is itself a status symbol, indicating ancestors who tended someone’s garden. Her “low connections” also include residents of “Cheapside,” a signifier of a family whose livelihood comes from exchanging goods and services rather than inherited wealth (Austen, *Pride* 24). But Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, an attorney from Meryton and his wife, *do* behave with propriety. Irvine describes them as “living refutations of Darcy’s snobbery. Propriety can indeed be observed by the urban middle class” (13). The Gardiners function as the crucial counterexample to Mrs. Bennet by revealing that the social failing of class by which Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy (at the novel’s beginning, at least) judge her is only imagined. Mrs. Bennet has
not failed her daughters by being born into a lower class than her husband; she and her husband have both failed to provide positive social and moral examples.

Though the Bennets have certainly set their children at a serious disadvantage, they are not entirely to blame for Elizabeth’s social and moral unworthiness. Like her father before her, her concerns are grounded in the present and the short-term. Among the most poignant examples of this moral failing is her reaction to Mr. Collins, the cousin who is in line to inherit after Mr. Bennet dies. Mr. Collins makes his intentions very clear almost immediately upon arriving at Longbourn. The “whole family” is present for the greeting, during which Collins assures Mrs. Bennet, “I am very sensible, madam, of the hardship to my fair cousins […]. But I can assure the young ladies that I come prepared to admire them” (Austen, Pride 43). To the modern reader, this speech is—for lack of a better term—creepy. In context, however, it is an indication that Collins has good intentions. He is aware that as Mr. Bennet’s heir, he alone has the power to give the Bennet girls access to their rightful inheritance through marriage. But Elizabeth never takes this into consideration. Indeed, she has no intention of even hearing him out. Before he can even begin a discussion with her, she seemed “about to escape,” and the narrator assures us that her efforts to keep from laughing are the only obstacle in the way of trying to “stop him further” (70, 71). This is not to say that Elizabeth should have accepted Collins right away (or at all). But it is to say that, unlike Collins, she is not considering anyone else’s perspective; she cannot even take the offer seriously. On the contrary, Elizabeth is rude and unkind to a man who is trying to do the right thing. And, perhaps most importantly, she does not have the first thought of what her response to this proposal will mean for her family
and the future of her childhood home. In this crucial moment for all the Bennets, Elizabeth fails to consider anyone but herself.

   Socially, Elizabeth fails by totally disregarding the opinions of others. Sometimes, this is an endearing quality from the reader’s perspective, but usually not in the eyes of the influential characters of the Bennets’ world. For example, Elizabeth is perfectly happy to “have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself,” even if it means losing the respect of Mr. Darcy and the Bingleys (Austen Pride 22). Later, she is happy to inform Lady Catherine de Bourgh (Darcy’s aunt and Collins’s patroness) that she did not receive any structured education (109). These are just a few of many examples in which Elizabeth makes it clear that she does not care what others think of her, even if caring about such things may be the only way out of the predicament she shares with her sisters. In other words, Elizabeth is not expected to have a happy ending, because neither she nor her family have met the necessary standards for such a thing; they are not worthy.

   Emma’s society, meanwhile, has gone to the opposite extreme. Their expectations for her are impossibly high, and she will never be worthy of the extremely high status she has been assigned. As in the case of Elizabeth, this status has been inherited to an extent, since “The Woodhouses were first in consequence there [Highbury]. All looked up to them” (Austen, Emma 57). Already, Emma is “looked up to” as a role model simply because of her family’s high status, even though she has never had a true role model of her own. Her mother is dead, and she related to her governess Mrs. Weston as a pseudo-sister, not as a teacher (55). Indeed, we know that Mrs. Weston taught Emma little because she “had such an affection for her as
could never find fault” (56). Emma never had the opportunity to learn from her mistakes; no one ever pointed them out to her. All of the authority figures in Emma’s life seem to share this deluded belief in her perfection, including her father. After all, she “would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by every body” (59). Emma’s goal is to keep her community blissfully ignorant of her faults. It is also important to note that Emma herself is quite aware of her imperfection. The façade of perfection is a mere performance. Even late in the novel, when she is in despair due to the impression that Mr. Knightley is on the brink of marrying her prodigy Harriet Smith, she assures the concerned Mrs. Weston that she is “perfectly” well (359). For her, it is not a matter of being perfect but rather of being “thought perfect.” Perception, not high achievement, is key. In adopting this attitude, Emma has placed an enormous amount of pressure on herself to maintain this illusion. The impossibly high standard of “perfection” therefore demands that Emma appear to transcend her imperfection.

For Emma, taking on the persona of the “witty woman” is an attempt to appear clever, charming, and therefore meritorious of her impossibly high ranking. During the “Box Hill episode,” this strategy fails when Emma wittily insults (or as we would say in modern slang, “roasts”) her “social inferior,” Miss Bates. In response to Miss Bates’s self-deprecating joke, “I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan’t I?” Emma says, “Ah ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once” (Austen, Emma 322). Though visibly embarrassed by this remark, Miss Bates’s reaction is both gracious and intelligent: “I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have
said such a thing to an old friend” (323). Miss Bates restrains herself from overtly passing judgment on Emma yet still publicly notes that her feelings are hurt. For the purposes of my analysis, it is helpful to take into account Molly Anne Rothenberg’s suggestion that Miss Bates “is the exemplar of egalitarianism in a highly stratified society,” highlighting this character’s equal treatment of others in spite of the class system that gives a few individuals, including Emma, much higher status than everyone else (185). I would extend Rothenberg’s conclusion further to assert that Miss Bates is the exemplar of equality in social class and human fallibility. Knowing that she herself can be “disagreeable,” Miss Bates empathizes with Emma as another unworthy individual, someone who is capable of disparaging “an old friend.” In other words, she draws attention to the fact that she and Emma have equally fallen short. In doing so, she reveals Emma’s personal “perfection” to be a farce, one that even her wit cannot conceal.

Wit takes on a more positive role in Pride and Prejudice, in which Elizabeth attempts to improve her dismal status with wit, usually drawing attention to herself rather than humiliating others. And on the surface, it would seem as though Elizabeth successfully proves by novel’s end that wit can “catch” a wealthy husband and all the merit and status that comes with him. Perhaps anticipating this misconception, Austen takes a moment in one of the novel’s final scenes to assess the nuanced role of wit in the central couple’s romance when Elizabeth says to Darcy:

“My behaviour to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?”
“For the liveliness of your mind, I did.”

“You may as well call it impertinence at once.” (Austen, *Pride* 248)

This quality of Elizabeth’s is so ambiguous that she and Darcy cannot even agree on the correct terminology for it. He carefully avoids disagreeing with her outright, but he clearly perceives a distinction between negative “impertinence” and positive “liveliness of mind.” These almost-synonymous terms alone reveal the precariousness of Elizabeth’s wit. Indeed, it was not her wit at all but her intelligence that initially drew Darcy to her. The narrator tells us that “no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she hardly had a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes” (15). In spite of his own determination to dislike her, Elizabeth’s intelligent expression demands Darcy’s notice. It is worthy of note that in this moment, Elizabeth is not speaking but observing the scene with her “dark eyes.” Her intelligence is marked by an outward-focused moment of silence, whereas notably witty moments entail “impertinent” judgments. Intelligence and wit may be closely related, but they are not identical. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the latter entails an unkind sentiment while the former involves greater consideration for others.

Moreover, Austen herself appears to have regarded her own use of wit as a negative rather than a positive characteristic. Some of her witty remarks, recorded in letters to her sister Cassandra, are so scathing as to have made scholars doubt the sincerity of Austen’s Christian beliefs (Mooneyham 43). Laura Mooneyham counters this interpretation by looking to Austen’s written prayers, going so far as to argue that Austen herself saw her gift for cleverly highlighting others’ faults “as her chief
besetting sin” (42). Mooneyham makes a bold assumption about Austen’s spiritual life. However, we do have solid evidence that Austen prayed for “a benevolent spirit toward every fellow-creature” and, in a separate instance, that she and those praying with her (her family, probably) would “be severe only in the examination of [their] own conduct [... and] judge of all [fellow-creatures] say and do with that charity which [they] would desire from them [them]selves” (Prayers 5, 9-10). Austen’s wording indirectly alludes to the spiritual dimension of a quick wit, especially the internal attitudes that might precede a witty insult. But perhaps the most important clue for my purposes comes from a passage she wrote to her niece Fanny, reassuring her that a suitor’s lack of wit was not a grave character flaw; rather, “wisdom is better than wit, and in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side” (Letters 441). Austen wanted her niece to know that though wit can be briefly amusing, it should not be the most highly valued character trait. Austen herself was certainly a witty woman, but she did not see her wit as the best part of herself. At times, she seems to have regarded it as a personal failing. It is therefore safe to say that Austen wrote Emma’s and Elizabeth’s wit as misguided attempts at performing worth, not as the true solution to their predicaments.

The second quality of grace is that it is “bestowed freely” (Oxford English Dictionary). Without merit to measure up to moral and social standards or the ability to prove themselves worthy with wit alone, Emma and Elizabeth require assistance from a figure of greater power. As I transition into this part of my argument, it is important to note that I do not intend to prove that Austen’s heroes are perfectly analogous to the Christian God. The heroes are complex human characters with flaws
of their own and must be redeemed in other ways. But that is the topic of another paper. I do intend to show that the Christian idea of divine grace resonates in Mr. Darcy’s and Mr. Knightley’s love for Elizabeth and Emma. In this respect, I agree with Mooneyham’s position that “Her [Austen’s] plots re-enacted the workings of Providence,” especially in the sense that Austen did not intend to replicate divine assistance (90). Rather, she “re-enacted” her own concept of it in her novels.

Regarding the need for divine assistance, I disagree with Michael Giffin, who describes the world of Austen as a “meritocracy” in which characters like Elizabeth and Darcy get happy endings because they “have earned their maturity” (92-93). Though these characters do mature and grow, they cannot simply grow out of their unworthiness. Even the matured Elizabeth, having already overcome her prejudice, will never be able to achieve even the appearance of worth after Lydia’s scandalous elopement, which is really a “proof of family weakness” (Austen, Pride 179).

Socially, of course, one sister’s fall irrevocably taints the others’ reputations. The elopement proves that the Bennets cannot meet society’s expectations, consequently rendering the vital husband-hunt a lost cause. From a moral perspective, Lydia’s elopement does not involve Elizabeth in any literal sense. However, as a literary device, the elopement provides crucial information about Elizabeth’s moral character. When she first meets the scoundrel Wickham earlier in the novel, Elizabeth’s reaction is not so different from Lydia’s. Her aunt Mrs. Gardiner advises against the match, and Elizabeth responds, “how can I [Elizabeth] promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow-creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist?” (96). Lydia’s elopement is essentially an image of what would have happened
had Elizabeth responded to her own impulses instead of an outside voice of reason. One could even argue that Lydia is performing behavior she learned from Elizabeth.

Moreover, it is no coincidence that Elizabeth receives news of the elopement just when she seems to have arrived at the threshold of a future with Darcy. The chapter preceding news of the elopement ended with Darcy’s unabashed acknowledgment to Miss Bingley that he “considered her [Elizabeth] as one of the handsomest women of [his] acquaintance” (176). At last, so many barriers that have kept Darcy from Elizabeth have disappeared, and he is not even concerned about the rumors Miss Bingley might spread about a potential engagement. But the elopement is necessary to remind us that one barrier still remains: Elizabeth is undeserving. As discussed above, she herself admits that her relationship to Darcy has always been “uncivil,” and she often intentionally caused him pain (248). She has no business marrying a man whom she treated so badly, and through the elopement, we are allowed to see Lydia as a second Elizabeth, living without a thought for how her actions may cause others pain.

Another important piece of the elopement’s dynamic is that Darcy feels responsible on some level for allowing Wickham to take advantage of another young girl after having nearly seduced his teenage sister. In an explanation to Elizabeth of Darcy’s involvement in Lydia’s and Wickham’s marriage, Mr. Gardiner reports that “The motive professed was his [Darcy’s] conviction of its being owing to himself that Wickham’s worthlessness had not been so well known as to make it impossible for any young woman of character to love or confide in him” (Austen, *Pride* 209). Darcy expresses that he had a responsibility to alert others to a danger that only he and his sister completely understood; therefore, he has failed in his duty toward others.
Indirectly, he has caused the Bennets pain, and he considers them in the way he proceeds. And because he acts with consideration of others, Darcy intelligently and successfully repairs the situation. Nothing about what he accomplishes resembles wit, but it does align with the idea of intelligence discussed above, which entails an awareness of how consequences impact others.

However, the crux of the story is not that Elizabeth wins a happy ending with her merit—or even her intelligence—but that someone with the power to change the situation, Darcy, recognizes her family’s need for assistance. Throughout the novel, he is keenly aware of their flaws. Indeed, his first proposal to Elizabeth is essentially a thorough list of Bennet family failings. Most significantly for the purposes of my argument, Darcy witnesses Elizabeth’s despair when she first learns about Lydia’s elopement. His first question is, “And what has been done, what has been attempted to recover her?” Elizabeth responds, “nothing can be done,” and “Darcy shook his head in silent acquiescence” (Austen, Pride 179). Though he is careful to avoid outright condemnation, Darcy recognizes the gravity of the situation, and he sees that the Bennets, left to their own devices, cannot climb out of the deep pit they have dug for themselves, no matter how much maturing Elizabeth may have done up until this point in the novel.

Emma’s case, once again, is the same principle taken to the opposite extreme. Mr. Knightley sees through her façade of perfection and recognizes that on her own, she will never be able to achieve the illusory standard of worth she wishes to have attributed to her. There are a small number of people, such as Miss Bates, who are aware of Emma’s faults. Among them, Mrs. Elliot (the newest bride in Highbury who
temporarily usurps Emma as highest-ranking woman) stands out as a character who publicly acknowledges Emma’s flaws to make herself seem superior. Her response to Emma’s hurtful remark at Box Hill is as follows: “Miss Woodhouse must excuse me. I am not one of those who have witty things at every body’s service. I do not pretend to be a wit. I have a great deal of vivacity in my own way, but I must be allowed to judge when to speak and when to hold my tongue” (Austen, *Emma* 323). Clearly, this response is intended to humiliate Emma just as she has humiliated Miss Bates. Mrs. Elton wishes to make herself appear more intelligent by condemning Emma’s scathing use of wit. Knightley, in contrast, is the only character in a position to openly acknowledge Emma’s faults and even call her out on them with the intent of helping her. Our narrator directly informs us in the first chapter that “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (59). Knightley has no need for Miss Bates’s subversion and caution and does not share Miss Elton’s competitive motives; he is a high-ranking landowner whose brother is married to her sister.

Following the event, it is Knightley who tells Emma that she behaved wrongly toward Miss Bates, concluding his speech by saying, “I must, I will—I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel” (326). This is a difficult task for Knightley, as evidenced by the amount of effort it takes to get past the words “I will,” but in his view, “very faithful counsel” is evidence of friendship, even if that means bringing the unpleasant truth of Emma’s imperfection to light. Like Darcy, Knightley sees that he has a responsibility to act with consideration for Emma by letting her know that she has caused someone pain and
should take measures to repair the relationship. And it must be pointed out that Knightley carries out this responsibility even though he risks permanently losing Emma (whom he has secretly loved for many years) as a result of telling her such unpleasant “truths.” As the scene comes to a close, the narrator assures us that “Time did not compose her” (327). The Box Hill episode has passed, but the underlying problem at its root has not. Emma requires assistance.

The third quality of grace is that it manifests in “the giving of blessings and granting of salvation,” or, to use more secular terminology, that it give new life (Oxford English Dictionary). I intend to argue that Austen has worked these ideas into the resolutions of Emma and Pride and Prejudice by writing heroes who provide a way for their heroines to live new lives unencumbered by the impossible standards and condemning judgments with which they have lived up until that point. In other words, Darcy’s and Knightley’s grace and unconditional love free the heroines. Emma is the most straightforward example, since almost all the forces determining the outcome of her narrative are outside of her control. The chapters leading up to Knightley’s declaration of love are practically a festival of misreadings. Learning that Harriett Smith harbors feelings for Knightley and simultaneously realizing that she herself has loved Knightley all along, Emma despairs, convincing herself that Harriett’s feelings are requited. Then, by a sheer stroke of luck (or so it would seem), Knightley turns out to have loved her “by dint of fancying so many errors” long before the novel began (Austen, Emma 389). But of course, it is not mere good fortune that Knightley regards her as the “sweetest and best of all creatures, faultless in spite of all her faults” (368).
In Knightley’s eyes, Emma is completely worthy of love and high regard whether or not she has met the standards of her high status.

Emma’s new life with Knightley is marked by freedom from these earlier constraints, as evidenced by the fact that her actions during the Box Hill incident are no longer worthy of note. When Frank Churchill’s letter (an attempt to justify his rakish behavior, some of which took place at Box Hill) makes its way into Knightley’s hands, Emma grows apprehensive in the knowledge that the letter will remind her fiancé of her most poignant display of imperfection. But rather than bringing Emma’s part in the Box Hill catastrophe into their conversation (as she expects), Knightley reads “steadily, attentively, and without the smallest remark; and, excepting one momentary glance at her, instantly withdrawn, in the fear of giving pain—no memory of Box Hill seemed to exist” (Austen, *Emma* 378). A singular glance is enough for both Emma and the reader to perfectly read Knightley’s thoughts. He *does* glance; he remembers it all perfectly. One could even make a case that the glance itself is an act of condemnation, but to do so would be a misreading: remembering and condemning are two very different things. Indeed, in the alternate universe where Knightley absent-mindedly fails to acknowledge Emma’s part in the Box Hill incident in any way, I no longer have an argument. We (and Emma) must know that he remembers Box Hill if we are to recognize grace in his actions. This crucial moment of remembrance “instantly” concludes when Knightley returns to his reading. He intentionally passes over what he and Emma both know *could* be said about Box Hill. In her new situation as the future Mrs. Knightley, the need for perfection has vanished as well as the standard by which it has been measured. In Knightley’s own words, “A
man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from” (364). At the novel’s end, Knightley has done just that. In her new “home,” Emma may live freely in the knowledge that Knightley’s love and respect are not tied to any arbitrary standard if and when she errs in the future. The home Knightley has provided is moral and spiritual as well as literal.

Elizabeth’s case is more nuanced. To acquire a complete sense of how grace comes to fruition in *Pride and Prejudice*, we must first take a detour through Elizabeth’s meeting with Lady Catherine, where the issue of moral desert returns to the forefront. At first glance, it would appear as though Elizabeth must prove her worth by standing up to Lady Catherine, the chief representative of all the forces that stand in the way of a marriage to Darcy, including “honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest,” in Lady Catherine’s own words (Austen, *Pride* 232). Elizabeth, however, never proves her own worth or even claims to be worthy. Lady Catherine, “with an air more than usually ungracious,” visits Longbourn to make a very specific case: Elizabeth does not deserve to become Mrs. Darcy and therefore she must not (229). Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s marriage would be a “scandalous falsehood;” after all, Lady Catherine asks, “Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted” by such a woman from such a family? (230, 233). And Elizabeth does not disagree with the premise of the case: she certainly does not deserve to marry Mr. Darcy. Socially, of course, the problem of the elopement has disappeared by this point, and Elizabeth contradicts Lady Catherine on the point of her class status; she says, “He [Darcy] is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter, so far we are equal” (232). In making this statement,
Elizabeth draws attention to Lady Catherine’s first point of confusion: she does not understand that social status is distinct from moral desert.

Morally, Elizabeth is hesitant to speak of herself with the same harshness that Lady Catherine does, but she avoids the many opportunities given her to retaliate on the point of her worthiness. Rather, Elizabeth brings attention to the fact that Darcy’s choice of wife is the only opinion that matters, and, she says, “if I am that choice, why may I not accept him” (232). “Uncivil,” witty, and inconsiderate as she is, Darcy could choose her, and she would marry him if he did. This is a completely foreign idea to Lady Catherine, whose parting words are, “I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet. I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention” (234). Here we witness Lady Catherine’s second point of confusion. She thinks that “deserving” is the factor of importance when it is not. Love is a good enough reason to bestow favor on an undeserving party. Of course, we know from the unfolding plot of the novel that Darcy will lavish plenty of undeserved attentions on Elizabeth precisely because news of this conversation will get around to him. By providing an opportunity for Elizabeth to acknowledge herself as a potential recipient of grace, the ungracious Lady Catherine becomes a means of bringing grace to fruition.

However, the key moment of grace in Pride and Prejudice is in the language of Darcy’s second proposal, especially when examined in context. Like a prince in a fairy tale, Darcy has singlehandedly saved the Bennets from the scandal that could have (and Lady Catherine thinks should have) exiled them from their future hopes. And like a damsel in distress, Elizabeth cannot help but “thank [him] again and again, in the name of all [her] family” (238). In response, he heroically assures her, “I
thought only of you” (238). If Austen had chosen to end the novel there, perhaps tacking on, “And they lived happily ever after,” it would not have been a shocking ending. On the contrary, we expect Elizabeth to marry Darcy at this point, and we expect that Darcy shares our expectation. But he does not. Instead, he says to Elizabeth, “My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever” (Austen, *Pride* 239). Even after all of the effort and expense he has put toward saving the Bennets—seeking out Lydia and Wickham in London, persuading them to marry, and even providing their income—Darcy expects nothing in return. If Elizabeth declines, Darcy exits quietly, and she carries on without him in the normalcy he has restored. What he has done was simply an act of grace, and there are no strings attached. Furthermore, Darcy had serious doubts as to whether Elizabeth cared anything about him even as he was carrying out the whole business of making Wickham marry Lydia. He reveals shortly after Elizabeth accepts his proposal that the conversation with Lady Catherine “taught [him] to hope […] as [he] had had scarcely ever allowed [him]self to hope before” (Austen, *Pride* 239). The news that gave him hope arrived long after his interference had ended. Darcy did not know if helping Elizabeth would get him a happy ending. He only knew that he could help her get one.

Elizabeth is free to choose her fate, and her choice is to become the mistress of Pemberley, where the looming financial crisis of Mr. Bennet’s death is no longer a concern, and every socially inferior, morally undeserving Bennet sister and parent is welcome to pay a visit. There is, however, one exception to this rule, the scoundrel brother-in-law Wickham. Wickham’s and Lydia’s relationship to their family after
their marriage is a strained one. We are told that “Though Darcy could never receive him [Wickham] at Pemberley, yet, for Elizabeth’s sake, he assisted him farther in his profession. Lydia was occasionally a visitor there, when her husband was gone to enjoy himself in London or Bath” (Austen, Pride 253). This anecdote in the novel’s conclusion forces us to ask why Wickham is singled out in this way, while Lydia is allowed to be a visitor. If grace is truly unmerited, why would it not cover over Wickham’s many misdeeds? I would argue that it does. Indeed, he in no way deserves membership in the family, help from Darcy “in his profession,” and the income on which he lives; on the contrary, Wickham simply happens to be a beneficiary of the grace shown toward the Bennets. Nevertheless, Wickham imagines that he is somehow in control of the gifts he has received. Even in the initial discussion with Darcy concerning a marriage to Lydia, “Wickham of course wanted more than he could get; but at length was reduced to be reasonable,” and in the novel’s conclusion he still “was not wholly without hope that Darcy might yet be prevailed upon to make his fortune” (210, 252). Wickham does not share Darcy’s and Knightley’s feeling of responsibility for the way his actions have impacted others. For him, it is never a question of how he has changed Lydia’s or her family’s lives but of how well he is doing as a result. Even in the novel’s conclusion, there is no sense of acceptance that Darcy’s money is not his own; he still expects to obtain more through cunning. Primarily self-interested as he is, he has no desire to partake in the community housed under Pemberley’s roof. To do so would entail interest and consideration in others’ welfare as well as acceptance of Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s free hospitality.
Lady Catherine functions as Wickham’s foil in the novel’s conclusion. Though initially exiled from Pemberley, she is ultimately a welcomed guest when she accepts the grace shown to her and chooses to be part of the community. Her response to Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s marriage is (predictably) “abusive, especially of Elizabeth” (Austen, *Pride* 253). Elizabeth, however, responds by extending the grace that was earlier shown to her. We are told that “by Elizabeth’s persuasion, he [Darcy] was prevailed upon to overlook [Lady Catherine's] offense, and seek a reconciliation” (253). Lady Catherine herself does not merit a visit to Pemberley after treating Elizabeth so badly. But she does visit once “her resentment gave way, either to her affection for him [Darcy], or her curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself” (253). Whatever her precise motives may be, Lady Catherine finds herself accepting grace by joining the community. Unlike Wickham, she relinquishes control over the currency around which her world revolves (social standing in her case, money in Wickham’s). And very unlike him, she considers her responsibility to Darcy and Elizabeth as her nephew and niece-in-law. In short, she does not share Wickham’s deluded notion of living outside of connection to others, and therefore, she can participate in a society founded upon unconditional respect and love. Of course, one must not forget that Lady Catherine is not the only problematic relative who visits Pemberley. Honored guests there include Mr. Bennet, Lydia, and an attorney from Meryton. And though Austen’s world is very concerned with the evaluation of people, *Pride and Prejudice*’s conclusion is not.

In a world where the tangled-up qualities of wit, class, merit, and wealth seem to determine everything in a life, Jane Austen’s novels ask, “Who deserves our respect
and high regard; who should have a happy ending?” I strongly suspect that Austen’s answer would have been similar to that of Wonder Woman’s title character: “It’s not about deserve. It’s about what you believe, and I believe in love” (2017). Austen’s world is not the realm of super-heroines or even overt Christ figures; none of her characters have any business delivering a powerful line like the one above before facing some personified force of evil. Like all of us, they are simply in the business of living with each other from day to day. But in the events of the everyday, the picnics, misreadings, scandals, and marriage proposals, Austen’s characters emerge from the confusion having formed a community. And not just any community, but an intelligent community founded upon the idea of grace, where it is not about “deserve.” Instead, it is about showing love and respect just because you can.

Through her witty women, we have the opportunity to see how intelligence factors into Austen’s ideas on the subject of a Christian community. The central question seems to be the manner in which this intelligence should be used: to provide needed assistance, to make accurate and wise judgments. Wit, however, is precarious in community, and tends to damage relationships more often than it heals. Therefore, the notion of propriety that is so central to any understanding of Austen’s fiction carries implications that go far beyond the shifting relationships between the classes at that time. Rather, propriety turns out to be a way of stepping away from the hierarchies that would normally divide people and intentionally finding a way to relate to others on the basis of shared humanity, or, in Austen’s words, as “fellow-creatures.”
Conclusion

All three chapters of this thesis conclude with the idea of community. In *Much Ado*, Beatrice’s wit and wisdom help us understand comedy as a way of thinking about problem-solving. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor learns to live in a community with her sister by coming to understand that rationality and emotionality are equally necessary components of wisdom. In *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, grace-based relationships allow the heroes and heroines to build communities together. This is especially the case for Elizabeth Bennet—or perhaps more accurate for my purposes, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy—whose entire family is allowed to be part of the community she establishes at Pemberley. In all three cases, Shakespeare and Austen present broken communities, and we see how they may be fixed with different sets of tools: wit, judgment, and wisdom.

Interestingly, wit, judgment, and wisdom are also the tools required for inventing characters like Beatrice, Dogberry, and Lucy Steele. In light of this, the witty woman can be thought of as the author who engineers unexpected mechanisms by which problems can be solved. Often this is an authorship of synthesis, in which multiple components of the plot must work in tandem to produce a desired outcome. In *Much Ado*, for example, Dogberry’s foolishness and Friar Francis’s plan both contribute to Hero’s eventual marriage. In *Sense and Sensibility*, it takes a long series of chain reactions to produce a situation in which Elinor and Edward may marry. The list goes on. In a metaliterary sense, then, there is plenty to learn from wit and comedy. Both provide helpful models of problem-solving, especially to a writer like me in desperate need of a way to conclude her Honors Thesis.
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