



Five Sisters and the Five Miss Bennets

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My twin sister and I were introduced to Jane Austen when we were around seventeen: *Pride and Prejudice* was on our high school English course and great was our delight in it.

The coincidence of five Bennet sisters and five M——'s and the fact that we shared with Jane Austen the genteel poverty of a clergyman's household, led to our identification with the novel. We lived in a small prairie village with few cultural amenities. For example, there was no public library, nor indeed was there one in our school. Our father's personal library was our only reading source which may explain the astounding fact that we are all working in the field of librarianship of one type or another. We read everything, including books our father declared unsuitable. He was a talented man with some training in painting and was an expert designer and workman in wood, so art was a part of our lives; we all "took" music lessons, so there were some advantages.

Our mother was a highly-intelligent, well-read woman. The thought of her being identified with Mrs. Bennet with five daughters to marry off was foreign to our background. The fact that intellect in women was not valued, or scarcely ever allowed to develop properly, brought us up short.

We sisters had a lot of fun together and developed our own forms of entertainment in more than this direction. Our *Pride and Prejudice* game was a source of considerable hilarity, for as all readers of JA are aware, some of the Bennet sisters are not particularly admirable.

Yes, we did assign roles. A few fell into place easily. Sister #3 was a vibrant, delightful and (to our minds) beautiful girl with lots of verve and great family loyalty. We could see her taking on a twentieth-century Darcy with

relish! She exhibited a “lively, playful disposition” which could not hold rancour long. Comparing her to Elizabeth was so obvious that this was how our game began.

I (sister #2) was embarrassed to be identified with Jane who could “never see a fault in anybody” and who was so universally admired by everybody both inside and outside her family. However, I do own that I tend to find the good in people so I suppose there is some merit in this designation. And, yes, this is a characteristic I am still accused of to this day.

Sister #4 was quite musical, with a charming singing voice, and, in contrast to the rest of us, she practiced faithfully; as a result she was quite accomplished. She was also a conscientious student, so she became Mary. Of course, she was not a pedant and she possessed a good mind, but there was enough likeness for us to give her this role.

Lydia was assigned to sister #5 since she could state (and still does) with absolute veracity “though I am the youngest, I’m the tallest.” She was (and is) one of the family’s beauties but never traded on that fact. No further identification was possible!

By default, the eldest sister was assigned to Kitty—they were both left over! Sister #1 was pretty and appealing and she undeniably had a way with the opposite sex. We could not label her a flirt, but somehow she had more boyfriends than the rest of us.

It can be seen from the above that the roles did not fit too well in some cases, but that did not prevent us from exercising our wit at one another’s expense. We furthered our enjoyment by quoting from the novel, often inappropriately. For example, if we were at odds over something, someone might say “My courage rises with every attempt to intimidate me.” Or, as we surveyed the garden that we had been sent out to weed: “Here we have ‘a pretty little wilderness’ do we not?” Much used was Lydia’s “It’s perfectly sickening” as it could apply to almost any situation. Another which we adapted to the occasion: “. . . (Kitty) has no discretion in her . . . (coughs); she times them ill.”

I trust that this adolescent use (or, to be exact, misuse) of literature does not offend readers of *Persuasions*. I cannot help but wonder if any other family made Jane Austen their own in a similar manner.