The Importance of Gender Structures for Characters in

*Pride and Prejudice*

Matilda Nygren

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My research questions are: why are there differences in how the four characters (Mr Collins, Charlotte, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mary) react to and adapt themselves to the social definitions of male and female roles? What were the social ideas about gender roles in the 18th century and how are these connected to the expressions and actions of my characters? How are the differences significant to the plot and the story of the four characters mentioned above; in other words, what are the consequences of the differences in their social life? As method in writing this essay I have used the primary source *Pride and Prejudice*, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and secondary sources such as different kinds of books and articles. These sources helped me to understand what it was like to live in the 18th century. Writing this essay has provided me with the insight that the gender performances of the characters reveal a complexity which might not be expected.

**Keywords:** history, gender performance, norm, Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice
Introduction

In Jane Austen’s well-known novel *Pride and Prejudice*, which was published in 1813, there are many characters who reflect various ways to be men and women and have opinions about how others live up to gender roles. This essay will explore the novel from the perspective of gender and focus on how male and female roles relate to the social definitions of these roles in the historical period, as well as the ideas about gender that are presented in the novel.

Much critical attention has been given to Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley in this regard, but I will instead analyse four minor characters who promote or represent specific ideas about gender roles. The fact that Mr Collins acts like a self-satisfied and pompous man can be seen in his words as well as in his manners, he believes in his own dominance over women as an educated man. Charlotte Lucas thinks of marriage in a practical and modest way, consequently she acts very much the way a woman was supposed to act in the 18th century - namely viewing marriage as a means of getting a comfortable home and a future which would be financially secure. Lady Catherine de Bourgh willingly speaks her mind about what women ought to do and ought not to do. Mary Bennet also fulfils the expected pattern of behaviour of an 18th century woman - though in her case it has more to do with the fact that she is chaste in her manners as well as her speech. As minor characters, these may be seen as less sophisticated than the main characters in the novel: however, they are more complex in how they reflect gender than might be expected.

My research questions are these: why are there differences in how the four characters (Mr Collins, Charlotte, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mary) react to and adapt themselves to the social definitions of male and female roles? What were the social ideas about gender roles in the 18th century and how are these connected to the expressions and actions of my characters? How are the differences significant to the plot and the story of the four characters mentioned above; in other words, what are the consequences of the differences in their social life?

I have examined a number of useful sources related to *Pride and Prejudice*, but unfortunately there is no abundancy of recent works that investigate my area of interest; which is gender
and feminism. Instead, when searching for sources I have found that the approaches on the novel tend to focus on other areas. Nevertheless, the book *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* by Margaret Kirkham has a chapter called “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”. In this chapter, Kirkham mentions how Austen was inspired by the writer Mary Wollstonecraft and how they were both involved in writing in a feminist way (Kirkham 40). Both Austen and Wollstonecraft disliked the male religious writers who compared women to fragile angels in need of protection (Kirkham 43-44). Furthermore, in the essay collection *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage Volume 2 1870-1940* which was edited by B.C. Southam; there is an essay called “The Feminism of Jane Austen” written by Rebecca West. Among other things, this chapter deals with the fact that the feminist attitude of Austen can be discerned in her novels. For example, in West’s examination of *Northanger Abbey*, she declares that the position of women in society at the time “was humiliating, dangerous, and founded on lying propositions” (Southam 295). Furthermore, West explains that it was a common belief that women could be possessed by men in two ways, “either in the decent way that led to the altar, or by abduction and seduction” and that a relationship was dictated by disinterested desire (296). Southam argues that Austen showed her feminist standpoint when she opposed these pretensions by telling the story of General Tilney’s mercenary pursuit of the main character Catherine Morland and the way he impolitely rejects her (295). In those days, no independence existed for women and “the pleasantest way of dependence was matrimony” (296). Southam further notes that Austen knew what it felt like to be a woman in that situation, because she was unmarried and thus never financially secure (296). These previous works of literary criticism all bring up the conditions for women in the late 18th century – such as the fact that they had no personal freedom – just as my arguments in this essay. For example, Charlotte marries because she knows it is the only way for her to ensure her financial security in the future. She also believes it is the way a woman should act, but there are times when this belief wavers. This essay intends to focus on ideas about gender that are featured in the novel and the way male and female roles were defined in the 18th century.

The gender roles in the novel influence the way the characters act and how they are perceived by others. They also contribute to shaping their future. Gender performance is something that everyone does. With that in mind, my theoretical approach will be Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, as presented in *Gender Trouble*. Butler claims that gender is not related to the sex which a person is born with but is indicated by the way a person performs or acts. Butler’s gender performativity theory suggests that gender is represented by the
actions of a person, consequently: “the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler 178). This means that the repeated gender actions of a man or woman create an idea in the people who watch: “This is what a man is like, this is what a woman is like”. Thus, the repeated actions reinforce the gender expectations in society. Gender performance is linked to the personalities of all characters: Mr Collins, Charlotte, Lady Catherine and Mary. For instance, it determines what partners Mr Collins and Charlotte will end up with. Charlotte, for example, performs her gender very well: she views marriage from a practical point of view, the way a woman was encouraged to at the end of the 18th century. Lady Catherine has already been married but in spite of that, she still needs to adjust herself to the gender demands; for example by being respectful of others according to the rules of the conduct books. However, she does not have to adapt as much as the other characters; she has less at stake for herself personally if she does not, compared to them. Therefore, she is relevant for my study, as, like the other characters she is more complex in the way she reflects gender aspects than might be presumed. While the characters attempt to adapt to gender expectations, their personalities affect their performances. Therefore, I argue that the gender performances of these minor characters, as viewed through Butler’s ideas about gender performativity, show that they are more complex than may be presumed.

**Mr Collins**

Mr Collins forms a sharp contrast to the definition of a desirable man expressed in the novel. One idea about what is desirable in a man comes from Jane Bennet, who is Elizabeth’s closest sister. Jane describes Mr Bingley as “‘just what a young man ought to be . . . sensible, good-humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! —so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!’” (Austen 62). In contrast, Mr Collins is described by the narrator as a grave and very formal man, and so lacks some of these qualities (109). When Mr Bennet is reading the letter from Mr Collins aloud (before his first visit to the Bennet family), Elizabeth quickly suspects that the priest is quite the opposite of the ideal man: “‘He must be an oddity, I think’, said she. ‘I cannot make him out. – There is something very pompous in his stile’” (108). As he is pompous and odd, she cannot expect him to be lively or sensible.

Following these initial gender performances, his actions at the Netherfield ball continue to contradict Elizabeth’s views of what a young man should be. Her views also reflect dominant ideas about men at the time. At the time of the setting in the novel, it was essential for men to have “a cultivation of manner” (Watkins 39). Knowledge and elegant manner were of great
importance because they indicated that the person was a true gentleman (39). Mr Collins’s manners are rather irritating than elegant and he lacks knowledge of the correct way of behaving in society. In that respect he is a rather strange exception to the standard, as the ladies and gentlemen of this period usually underwent a “training in social rituals” (48). Mr Collins would thus be expected to know how to behave properly in the company of others. In view of this expectation, it is understandable that from Elizabeth’s point of view; he does not act like a man should.

Mr Collins’s lack of intelligence manifests itself as an ignorance of social etiquette at the ball mentioned above, when he insists on addressing Mr Darcy although they have not been introduced to each other (Austen 139). Mr Collins is full of gratitude and reverence to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, because she is his patroness and has given him a rectory. She is also the aunt of Mr Darcy; thus, Mr Collins wants to speak to him as a compliment to Lady Catherine. But Mr Collins lacks knowledge of the correct social etiquette, which is evident as Elizabeth must explain to him that “it must belong to Mr Darcy, the superior in consequence, to begin the acquaintance” (139). However, Mr Collins firmly believes that he knows how to act in social life and tries to convince Elizabeth of that:

‘My dear Miss Elizabeth, I have the highest opinion in the world of your excellent judgment in all matters within the scope of your understanding, but permit me to say that there must be a wide difference between the established forms of ceremony amongst the laity, and those which regulate the clergy; for give me leave to observe that I consider the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom.’ (139)

Although his argument has more to do with social class than gender, the way Mr Collins speaks to Elizabeth as he tries to convince her that his plan is proper; shows that he believes he lives up to one aspect of his social role as a man – that of being more intelligent than she is: “in the case before us I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady like yourself” (139). Although Elizabeth was indeed correct and he has committed a blunder, his attitude reflects gender roles of the historical period. The male education in the 18th century was more extensive than the female one. Boys studied Latin and Greek classical texts, some modern history and geography; among others (Le Faye 81). Furthermore, education was not considered necessary for girls until well into the nineteenth century and even if they were educated they had to be content with simple arithmetic and “some very scrappy ideas of history and geography” (Le Faye 87,
Thus, Mr Collins asserts the gender difference in education and uses it to claim his superiority, but he does not conform to the expectation of intelligence for men.

Furthermore, Mr Collins never realizes the way others view him. Mr Darcy looks upon his behaviour with “unrestrained wonder” and a contempt which “seemed abundantly increasing” (Austen 140). At the end of their conversation, Darcy “only made him a slight bow, and moved another way” (140). But Mr Collins is not intimidated and tells Elizabeth that there was no harm done: “‘I have no reason, I assure you’, said he, ‘to be dissatisfied with my reception. Mr Darcy seemed much pleased with the attention’” (140). As mentioned above, to be perceived as noble; men took care to behave in an elegant way. A gentleman would have realized the mistake made by addressing Darcy without a proper introduction at first and the necessity of apologizing. Indeed, a gentleman would not have made the mistake at all, but would have waited for Darcy to take the initiative; or for someone else to introduce them to each other. But as Mr Collins is no elegant gentleman and lacks the knowledge of social etiquette, he cannot realize that he has made any mistake or that Darcy’s cool response to their conversation would have anything to do with his own behaviour.

Mr Collins’s failure to act in the intelligent manner expected of a man is decisive in preventing his initial marriage plans. The reason for this failure is found in his gender performance, which seems to be affected by his personality. As the narrator mentions, he is self-satisfied and he has a great awareness of his privileges and power as a clergyman (114). His selfishness is apparent when he proposes to Elizabeth and she clearly rejects him, but he persists in believing that she will accept him. He responds: “‘It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable’” (149-150). Mr Collins has his own ideas on how women are supposed to act. When replying to Elizabeth’s rejection, he mentions that he believes women often “reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time” (148). Because he has this idea of women, he assumes that Elizabeth is acting according to it and so he is not discouraged. Even though she constantly refuses him and says that she is not the kind of woman he is referring to, he continues to believe that she is not serious in her refusal. Mr Collins also assumes that Elizabeth only wants to increase his love by keeping him in suspense, because it is “‘the usual practice of elegant females’” (150). The way Mr Collins performs his gender reflects the way he believes he ought to act. He never loses his temper; but remains patient in his stubbornness and assumes that she is just modest
and will eventually change her mind. Again, his performance can be explained by his pompous personality. Rebekah Hall writes in her article “Pride and Prejudice and the Purpose of Marriage” about the way Mr Collins is negatively portrayed: “This characterization is connected to how he regards marriage as a career advancement” (Hall section 6). Mr Collins is already financially secure and has a career in society. Thus, he can treat marriage as nothing more than a way to reach a higher standing in that career – he does not have to care about how a marriage proposal might be received (Hall section 6).

Furthermore, his distorted notion of gender roles – his own as well as Elizabeth’s - prevents him from understanding that he is being rejected. He either cannot read the situation correctly or simply does not realize how he is perceived by others.

Mr Collins hints that his emotions may get the better of him, but because of his odd personality he cannot really convince Elizabeth of his passion. At first, she is surprised: “….so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther…” (Austen 147). The reason for her laughter is that Mr Collins starts his proposal by saying “‘But before I am run away with my feelings…’” (147). To Elizabeth, “the idea of Mr Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings” is absurd (147). When he claims that he might get emotional later, it becomes hard for Elizabeth to take him seriously. Because he is silly and not sensible, happy or lively – which is what Jane Bennet said would be desirable qualities in a man - it is hard for her to imagine he would be emotional. Later, his refusal to understand her unwillingness to accept the proposals makes her desperate: “‘I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it’” (150). The pride of Mr Collins is indeed hurt afterwards, but he is too conceited to be able to conclude that his odd behaviour is the reason for the firm refusal (153). Again, he does not realize how other people see him.

Although he may appear simply unaware, Mr Collins’s failure to recognize how others react to his gender performance emphasizes his complexity as a character. The only way for him to be punished would be if he understood that he was being socially punished. But he never seems to realize this at any point. Butler writes that “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences…. indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 178). Accordingly, because Mr Collins fails to do his gender right; Elizabeth “punishes” him by disapproving of him (when she talks about him, for example) and refusing his proposal. She rejects him because she does not like him nor the way he performs his
gender. If he had behaved more according to the male standard, Elizabeth may have been able to develop warmer feelings for him. But the consequence of these unsuccessful gender performances is that Elizabeth considers Mr Collins as ignorant and nerve-racking. However, despite this punishment, he marries Charlotte Lucas, which he and the social community do not regard as a punishment. People in the society of the novel rather believe that it was advantageous. When Mr Darcy visits Elizabeth at Hunsford, he mentions that “Mr Collins appears very fortunate in his choice of a wife” (Austen 212). In a letter of thanks to Mr Bennet after staying at Longbourn for a while, Mr Collins himself writes that Lady Catherine de Bourgh “so heartily approved his marriage, that she wished it to take place as soon as possible” (169). Indeed, in a letter to Mr Bennet at the end of the novel – where Mr Collins refers to the scandal of Lydia’s elopement - it even seems like he is happy that Elizabeth rejected him: “For had it been otherwise, I must now have been involved in all your sorrow and disgrace” (313). Mr Collins does not recognize the insult he produces, the fact that he was once rejected does not matter – because he cares more about his reputation. If Mr Collins had married Elizabeth, his reputation would have been destroyed when Lydia eloped because he would be related to the Bennet family. Mr Collins did not perform his gender well – being too pompous and conceited – consequently he is punished in the sense that people (for example Darcy and Elizabeth) do not like him. But he does not come across any disgrace from society because of his gender problems and he finally manages to find a suitable wife. Charlotte accepts him despite all his faults.

Charlotte

Charlotte fits many of the expectations of a middle-class lady at the end of the 18th century. One of the ways she lives up to expectations is regarding marriage. Upon marriage, the financial future of a son or daughter was determined (Watkins 24). She explains to Elizabeth that she is “not romantic” and asks only “a comfortable home” (Austen 165), therefore she has no objections to marrying Mr Collins. Her only object is to make sure that she will be financially safe in the future. Consequently, Charlotte's views about marriage align with the gender expectations. Mr Collins will be able to ensure that, because when describing how the priest’s proposal to Charlotte was received by Mr and Mrs Lucas, the narrator notes that Mr Collins's “prospects of future wealth were exceedingly fair” (163). Furthermore, it is not only Charlotte’s financial situation that will be safe once her marriage has taken place, but also that of her family. Marriage determined the future of “unmarried sisters – and perhaps the bride’s mother, if widowed” too (Watkins 24). Consequently, as Sir William and Lady Lucas
can only “give little fortune” (Austen 163) to their daughter; her marriage is a relief for them. Another way in which Charlotte lives up to the expectations is connected to female occupations. Household business was an important business, a gentlewoman had many duties; she had to review menus, prepare for receiving guests and finally; she busied herself with bookkeeping (Watkins 32). When Mrs Bennet inquires of Elizabeth how Mr and Mrs Collins are doing, she praises Charlotte’s housekeeping abilities (Austen 254), thus admitting that Charlotte fulfils her role in the way which is expected of her.

It is Charlotte’s own personality which makes her able to fulfil the womanly standard of that time. She is very unpretentious; therefore, it is easy for her to be modest. Her personality can be described as what Butler terms an appearance of substance. “Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity” (Butler 179). This means that internally discontinuous gender acts are not linked to a core identity, because gender is constructed socially via a series of actions. When mentioning this appearance of substance, Butler further adds that the appearance is “a performative accomplishment” (that is, an achievement which a person manages to do by behaving in a certain way) which the public (the people who watch the actors) and the actors (that is, the people who perform the gender) “come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 179). Perform in the mode of belief means that the actor performs the gender role in the belief that this is how a woman/man should behave, this is the standard. Charlotte has a constructed identity in that she behaves the way women were supposed to behave. Perhaps she believes that her appearance agrees with the way a woman should act and so she performs the role in the mode of belief. Given how the society responds to her marriage to Mr Collins, and praise from women like Mrs Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as discussed above, her performance is believed.

While Charlotte’s qualities and views make her suitable for the strict gender roles at the end of the 18th century, they also involve awkward situations for her to endure. These awkward moments reveal the complexity; her performance appears believable on the whole, but she indicates it may be internally discontinuous with her wishes at times. One of Charlotte’s gender acts is her acceptance of Mr Collins’s proposal. She does it because she needs to make her future safe. But because of that, she also finds herself in an awkward situation when it is time to walk to Longbourn and tell Elizabeth: “Elizabeth would wonder, and probably would blame her; and though her resolution was not to be shaken, her feelings must be hurt by such disapprobation” (Austen 163). In this situation, Charlotte is troubled and therefore she
temporarily appears to question her gender performance. The reason for this has to do with Charlotte’s attachment to Elizabeth and their valuable friendship. It pains her that she has to endure the disapproval of her friend in order to fulfil the gender expectations. On Charlotte’s invitation, Elizabeth later visits the Collins’s home in Hunsford along with Charlotte’s sister Maria and her father Sir William. During this visit, Elizabeth studies Charlotte’s reactions whenever Mr Collins says something awkward: “Once or twice she could discern a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear” (192). On these occasions, Charlotte appears to feel a discomfort of some kind. This reflects Butler’s idea on the appearance of substance. Charlotte’s gender actions, following the expectation that a wife should be supportive and appreciative of her husband, are just an appearance of substance, a performance which she does not believe in at that very moment. Indeed, this is the only situation in which Charlotte displays any sentiment which shows she is troubled by her husband’s behaviour. When Elizabeth is about to leave Hunsford, she reflects on Charlotte’s situation, and believes that for Charlotte: “Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms” (244). Elizabeth’s sense of the situation is that eventually Charlotte will tire of those things in life, but her perspective may be limited. This idea is supported by Joshua Rothman, who mentions in his article “On Charlotte Lucas’s Choice”: “Lizzy, when she thinks these things, hasn’t thought as carefully as Charlotte has about what ‘wordly advantage’ might mean” (Rothman section five). Thus, Elizabeth could be misunderstanding her friend and not realize that she is really pleased.

Charlotte meets all the demands on a woman and that serves a purpose in the plot too. If she had not been so practical and unassuming in her views about marriage, for example, she would not have been able to accept Mr Collins. In doing so, she provided some consolation for him after he was rejected. However, by behaving in accordance with the gender structure she agreed to spending the rest of her life with the irksome Mr Collins. Charlotte may seem usual for giving up the romantic idea of marriage for the benefit of becoming financially secure. But the fact is that apart from having to spend time with Mr Collins, her marriage has provided her with a quite agreeable life - she has money, a comfortable home and she likes her duties. This is another example of Charlotte’s complexity, she seems foolish but it shows that for the most part, she has actually learnt to believe in the role she is supposed to play – the standard late 18th century woman.
Lady Catherine

In expressing the opinions that she tells her listeners, Lady Catherine can be said to be in line with the 18th century gender expectations. For example, she is astonished to hear that only one of the Bennet sisters plays and sings, that they never had drawing lessons or a governess. She believes that “Nobody but a governess” can provide the thorough direction so necessary in education (Austen 199). At the time, girls were usually educated either by a governess or their parents. A little drawing, singing and playing piano or harpsichord were equally established parts of a female education (Le Faye 87). Another way in which she reflects ideas of the time relates to the idea that single women who travelled on stage coaches were uncommon, and seen as dangerous. One 18th century newspaper warned women: “‘you are classed with company of every description, and who may very frequently turn out very disagreeable….and are frequently insulted by the indecent behaviour of the coachman’” (Le Faye 58). From that it follows that Lady Catherine is keen on having a servant accompanying Elizabeth and Maria Lucas: “I cannot bear the idea of two young women travelling post by themselves. It is highly improper…. Young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life” (Austen 240). These two situations – showing astonishment on hearing that there was no governess and wanting the girls to be accompanied by a servant – are instances of how well lady Catherine reinforces expected gender roles.

However, through Lady Catherine’s often impertinent and ill-mannered behaviour, she sometimes manages to go against the expectations of her gender performance, as is seen in social conduct expectations of the period. The English writer Hannah Woolley was not a contemporary of Jane Austen but her conduct books were reprinted many times after her death (Ellison section i). Katherine Ellison, who wrote the critical introduction to Woolley’s The Gentlewoman’s Companion, writes: “Beginning in the late seventeenth century and continuing into the eighteenth century, women saw a shift in the English economy of the middle and merchant classes” (Ellison section xiii). This meant that more middle-class women could hire staff so they would have more time for other things, for example reading. Because of that, “a large number of advice books, conduct literature, magazines, miscellanies, mother’s manuals, and midwifery information” were produced (Ellison section xiii). In The Gentlewoman’s Companion, Woolley writes that there are four circumstances that a woman must consider when behaving in a civil way. One of them implies the necessity to “Preserve all due respect to the quality of the Person you converse withal” (Woolley section 46). Consequently, a truly well brought-up lady should treat her partner in
conversation with all the respect which he or she deserves – she must be aware of the social quality of those who are lower than her. Once in the drawing room at her home Rosings Park, Lady Catherine points out that Elizabeth should practice her playing in Mrs Jenkinson’s room: “She would be in nobody’s way, you know, in that part of the house” (Austen 207). Mrs Jenkinson is the companion of Lady Catherine’s daughter, Miss De Bourgh. In this scene, the gender performance of Lady Catherine is not appropriate. By talking to Elizabeth in that careless way, she does not treat her with the respect which Woolley advises and so does not live up to the gender expectations. Because of that, Darcy becomes embarrassed which the reader learns by reading that he “looked a little ashamed of his aunt’s ill breeding, and made no answer” (207).

Furthermore, the impoliteness of lady Catherine causes her to break another one of Woolley’s rules of conduct: that a woman’s behaviour “should be such as to please in all companies” (Woolley section 33). At the end of the novel, Lady Catherine comes to Longbourn with a view to stop Elizabeth from marrying Darcy. Lady Catherine is uncommonly sullen at this visit, she does not bother to greet Elizabeth in a proper way and declines Mrs Bennet’s offer of refreshment. The impoliteness makes Elizabeth so angry that she refuses to address her guest for a while: “Elizabeth was determined to make no effort for conversation with a woman, who was now more than usually insolent and disagreeable” (Austen 363). Lady Catherine threatens to counteract the union between Elizabeth and Darcy. Consequently, Elizabeth fears that Darcy will resign himself to the wishes of his aunt: “…. she could not help feeling some uneasiness as to the possible consequence of her persisting in this interference” (369). Lady Catherine is acting in an uncivil way towards Elizabeth and causing her to feel uncomfortable. Afterwards the narrator notes that the visit produces a “discomposure of spirits” in Elizabeth which “could not be easily overcome” (369). Thus, Lady Catherine performs her gender against the social expectations that women be amiable and agreeable.

Lady Catherine’s distinct gender performance can be connected to the fact that she is different from the other three characters as she belongs to another social class and she is much older. Her gender performance is that of a moralizing, self-assured aristocratic woman who knows that others such as Mr Collins, Charlotte and Elizabeth are beneath her in rank, which increases her arrogance even more. This becomes evident in the very first description of her when Elizabeth visits Rosings: “Her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank” (197). Again, Lady
Catherine is unsuccessful in performing her gender because she does not follow Woolley’s rule that a woman should be amiable wherever she is.

At times, Lady Catherine performs her gender correctly by acting in a charming way but sometimes she fails to do that, revealing the false nature of that performance. Butler writes that there is an “abiding gendered self” (that is, a self which obeys the gender demands of society) which is “structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ‘ground’” (Butler 179). Lady Catherine is a good example of this “abiding gendered self”. She obeys the gender demands in that she acts like an elegant and dignified lady when she receives guests at Rosings. For example, even though Mr Collins eagerly praises every dish in a way which must be tiresome; she gives “most gracious smiles” (Austen 197). When Mr Collins and the rest of the party admire the view from one of the windows, she is also very amiable. This is because she is modest when she informs them that it is “much better worth looking at in the summer” (197). She also acts according to Woolley’s rule, that women should behave themselves agreeably everywhere. These occasions where Lady Catherine acts like a good lady are the repeated acts in which she creates a firm identity – situations where she is able to perform according to her gender because of her social class. The role of a dignified and aristocratic woman is a part of her identity. By behaving as she does, smiling at Mr Collins and talking about the view, she is saying to herself and her listeners: “I am a noble, cultivated woman.” Moreover, the acts create the idea of gender in Lady Catherine’s onlookers – the idea of a charming, yet stately noblewoman. But there is an “occasional discontinuity” – namely, she sometimes steps aside from the identity of an amiable lady and becomes a disagreeable woman. This can be seen, for example, in the events mentioned above where both Elizabeth and Darcy are affected in a negative way by her words and actions. That is when her performance matches Butler’s idea of the “abiding gendered self”, because it reveals that her identity as the charming lady who is the hostess at Rosings is in fact groundless and only temporal. Just as with Charlotte, Lady Catherine’s behaviour is nothing more than an act.

When Lady Catherine behaves disagreeably she is not performing her gender in a correct way which affects people around her in a negative way. She manages to create a disadvantageous impression on Maria Lucas. During Maria’s first visit to Rosings she is scared “almost out of her senses” by the rigidity (196). Furthermore, as Lady Catherine is so finicky in wanting the
gowns to be packed in the right way; Maria feels obliged before the home journey “to undo all the work of the morning, and pack her trunk afresh” (242).

Although Lady Catherine’s high status in society sometimes makes it easier for her to perform her gender right, she is eventually punished. In spite of her rude behaviour, Darcy is the only one who pluck up courage to punish her. At the very end of the novel, the narrator mentions that Lady Catherine was very angry when she replied to Mr Darcy’s letter in which he announced his marriage: “…. She sent him language so very abusive, especially of Elizabeth, that for some time all intercourse was at an end” (395). Consequently, the way Lady Catherine expresses herself on Elizabeth causes Darcy to temporarily cut the connections with his aunt. Previously in the novel, Lady Catherine expresses her sadness over the fact that Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam have left Rosings: “‘I assure you, I feel it exceedingly’…. ‘I believe nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do’” (239). Thus, Darcy’s choice to cut the connections is a punishment for Lady Catherine; because of her regard for him. The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is another punishment. When Lady Catherine visits Longbourn in order to prevent it, she claims that Elizabeth would disgrace the future family line by accepting a proposal: “‘Heaven and earth! – of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?’” (367). This is perhaps the real punishment, the fact that the honour and propriety which Lady Catherine is so concerned about will be disregarded.

Mary

Like Charlotte, Mary appears well suited to be a woman at the end of the 18th century. But whereas Charlotte is suitable because of her practical approach to marriage and aptitude for housekeeping, what makes Mary so apt has more to do with her qualities; the way she is and the way she acts. For example, she is chaste and anxious to warn the other sisters against bringing disgrace on themselves after Lydia has eloped: “‘loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable…she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex’” (305). She is also modest in several ways. One of them is that she would rather refrain from Lydia’s wild behaviour. This becomes apparent when four of the Bennet sisters return to Longbourn after having dined together in town. Lydia, who travelled by coach along with Kitty earlier; exclaims that they had a marvellous time: “‘Oh! Mary’, said she, ‘I wish you had gone with us, for we had such fun!’” (249). But Mary replies that such
adventures “would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book’” (249). Mary is also modest in that she talks of amusement in a rather calm tone of voice. When the Bennet family have received an invitation for the ball at Netherfield, she admits that she is looking forward to it: “‘Society has claims on us all; and I profess myself one of those who consider intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable for every body’” (130). These examples demonstrate that Mary is consistent in her gender performance. Butler states: “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established…” (Butler 178). The “performance” of Mary consists of her always behaving like a woman should, being modest and chaste. In Janet Todd’s essay collection The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice, there is a chapter called “Character” written by Robert Miles. In the chapter Miles mentions the writer Hannah More. More, who was a contemporary of Jane Austen, wrote plays and poetry about morals and religion. Mary’s virtues can be connected to More’s conduct books. More celebrated the power women had as mistresses of the household – a power they could use “through chaste femininity” (Miles 26). By “chaste femininity”, More referred to the fact that women could fulfil the qualities of their sex by acting in a chaste way. The conduct books about “self-denying propriety” which More was an advocate for (Miles 26) were popular at the time of the setting in Pride and Prejudice. This explains why Mary herself “talks like a conduct book” (Miles 26), she is influenced by More’s idea about the honourable woman. Todd also points out the way Mary differs from her elder sister Elizabeth. Mary is reserved and clearly drawn to More’s thoughts about “the virtuous female as the mistress of the household” (Miles 26). Elizabeth, on the other hand, is lively and makes no attempts of suppressing her personality.

Like Mr Collins and Charlotte, the very personality of Mary is decisive when it comes to her adjustment to the prevailing gender structures. She behaves in a quiet and orderly way, she is interested in morality; hence it is easy for her to conform to the standard. Furthermore, there is something else to take into consideration, namely that Mary is inferior to her sisters regarding beauty. Beauty is also part of the gender expectations on women of the time, a part which Mary cannot fulfil. The novel mentions that while she was surrounded by them, she was “mortified by comparisons” (394) between their beauty and her own. Under those circumstances it is only natural for Mary to try to assert herself by being wise and moralizing. She has no beauty, so perhaps she tries to find other ways of distinguishing herself as well as fulfilling the demands of the gender structure. Her reasoning may be that if she cannot be
beautiful, she might as well be a proper and respectable lady. Thus, Mary’s easiness in complying with the gender structure can be explained by partly disposition and partly an attempt of compensation.

Still, there’s one aspect of Mary which does not entirely fit in with the social regulations that governed what women ought to or ought not to do at the end of the 18th century. The aspect which stands out is that Mary is intelligent. Jane Bennet mentions that Mary “studies so much” (308). Education for girls was considered “a hinderance to their settlement in life, as they would be regarded with suspicion if thought clever or bookish” (Le Faye 87). Mary acts in every way as an 18th century woman should, and yet she shows an interest in education. No one ever objects to her studies, but she still distinguishes herself as the peculiar one in that respect. The other sisters often ignore her because of her high-flown way of acting and talking. Although Elizabeth and Jane politely listen to what the narrator describes as Mary’s “observations of thread-bare morality” (Austen 105), Lydia, in her usual thoughtless and insensitive way, can never be bothered to attend to her (249). In the passage where Elizabeth and Jane return from Netherfield and find their younger sister studying, it is mentioned that Mary reads about “thorough bass and human nature” (105) and that she has picked out excerpts for them to read. What this means is essentially that Mary studies morality and that she quotes moral ideas that she has read in her books. But she does not seem to understand that those ideas are not new, they have been read and quoted many times; thus, they are “thread-bare”. The reactions of the other Bennet sisters to Mary’s behaviour, the fact that all of them overlook it – whether with the kindness of Jane and Elizabeth or the arbitrariness of Lydia - indicate that they view her gender performance as proper, yet a little bit excessive. Mary is too much modesty, too much chastity. Her gender performance is so correct that it almost becomes a parody of the 18th century expectations of women.

Nonetheless, Mary’s very conscientious personality adds some humour to the plot and relieves the atmosphere. For example, after the drama following Lydia’s elopement; Mary attempts to say a few words of comfort but ends up sounding comic: “But we must stem the tide of malice, and pour into the wounded bosoms of each other, the balm of sisterly consolation”’ (305). Elizabeth only replies to this pronouncement by lifting her eyes in amazement, as she is “too much oppressed to make any reply” (305). Elizabeth’s gesture is another indication that Mary’s gender performance is too excessive. It is almost as if the elder sister is amazed as well as amused that the younger one can express herself in such a conscientious way. Nevertheless, Mary continues to quote moral extractions to herself and
does not appear to be discouraged. In this respect she resembles Mr Collins. Like him, she does not seem to care about what other people think of her or the way she acts.

Because of Mary’s gender behaviour as a proper and moralizing woman, no man ever courts her and therefore she becomes “the only daughter who remained at home” (393), which the narrator reveals at the end of the novel. Even though she quite consistently acts according to the expected gender roles, she is never rewarded for it. On the contrary – as I have mentioned above in describing the reactions of the other sisters – Mary is not taken seriously because she overdoes her gender performance.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, gender structures greatly influence the lives of the four characters in different ways. Each of them performs their gender in a way which shows that they are more complex than expected. For example, Mr Collins claims that he knows how to behave in society, yet does not understand how the etiquette works. So, he is neither an intelligent nor elegant man, contrary to the dominant social ideas. However, his only punishment for his unsuccessful gender performance is the disapproval of Elizabeth and Darcy; he is never punished in an apparent way by the society and he finally finds the suitable wife which Lady Catherine advised him to marry. As for Charlotte, her modest character enables her to fulfil the womanly gender structure but despite her seeming consistency she indicates that at times her gender performance may be discontinuous with her desires. Lady Catherine seemingly reflects the gender expectations in her many opinions and lives up to her expected gender role in some ways. Nonetheless, she often performs it in a defective way by being disrespectful and disagreeable; she is able to be defective in her gender performance to an extent because of her social rank – that “excuses” her a bit. But despite that rank she is still punished, both through Darcy - who temporarily cuts the connections with her at the end of the novel – and through the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth; which Lady Catherine views as disgraceful. Mary’s gender performance is a way to compensate for her plainness; she tries to distinguish herself by always acting in a way which is approved for a woman. However, the attempts of Mary to act as the most proper and wise lady only result in a life of loneliness and being ignored by her other sisters. Her gender performance is both consistent and proper, but she is never rewarded for it because of its exaggeration. The gender performances of the four characters have revealed that they are unexpectedly complex. This provides the reader with a
new way of looking at the novel and the events in it; not to mention that the characters can be seen from new perspectives so that it may be easier to understand their actions.

Works Cited


