Mary Bennet Admires the Mute Swans

“I don’t know why you spent so much time in Uncle Philips’s study instead of talking with Aunt Philips and Lady Chatwick and me. You missed out in hearing about how Mrs. Furley thinks that a double ceremony on Christmas Eve would be stunning, if only the weather would agree, as velvet dresses in jewel tones could be worn by the ladies to the celebratory ball. Wouldn’t that be grand, Mary?” Kitty replays in excruciating detail their Aunt Philips’s accounts of how every woman in Meryton is reacting to the nearly simultaneous engagements of Mary and Kitty’s two eldest sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, both to men of considerable means. Only a few months ago, one would have ascribed to Kitty a somewhat quiet and passive demeanor. However, that judgment stemmed only from her relative proximity to her verbose and exuberant sister Lydia, rather than reticence on Kitty’s part. Nature abhors a vacuum, and Kitty aims to fill it with mindless drivel.

Mary smiles curtly and marches on, pulling her long skirt up to nearly her knees to avoid dragging it through a muddy section of the road. Kitty plods straight through the muck, oblivious to the impact on her pastel yellow hemline. For a girl who loves shopping for new dresses, Kitty pays very little heed for their protection. Lily of the valley and cornflowers are still blooming along the side of the path, but the flowering strawberry trees signal the approaching autumn. The mature sunflower heads face westward towards the mid afternoon sun.

The sisters stop to rest beside a lily pad covered pond in which six young mute swans, just past cygnets, are circling each other. One young male attempts to attract the attention of a young female, but another male intervenes with vigorous wing flapping. Mary attempts to impart some wisdom to her younger sister. “This is the first mating season for these young swans, but the decision is important, as mute swans pair for life.”

“Oh how romantic!” Kitty gushes, “We must stay to see if any pair up. How do you know which are male versus female?”

“The males have an enlarged black knob at the end of their beaks,” Mary instructs as she gestures towards the closest male, “especially during mating season. Otherwise, you can’t really tell.”

“Can you imagine, Mary, not being able to tell the boys from girls? Wouldn’t that be awkward, not knowing how to approach someone?”

Mary nods, and thinks how wonderful it would be, to not automatically approach someone differently based on gender. If only she were male, she would not need to worry about the entail placed on Longbourn, as it would pass to her upon their father’s death. Only if she were he. That one’s fate can rest so utterly on something so trivial is maddening. These are thoughts she keeps to herself. Or at least, Mary does not share them with Kitty. Maria Lucas, Mary’s best friend and neighbor, is a much more acceptable confidant for Mary’s private musings. But Maria does not need to worry about an entail, as she has two brothers, the elder of which is positioned to inherit Lucas Lodge. Maria will always have a place to live.” By Mary doesn’t want to let her jealousy of Maria’s more favorable situation seep into her otherwise quite delightful day.

Mary recalls how Maria confided in her, after Maria’s return from Rosings, in Kent, to visit her sister Charlotte Collins. Maria’s accounts of the entire adventure, but particularly her descriptions of the formidable yet intriguing Lady Catherine de Bourgh, took on a life of their own.

Finding a private space at Lucas Lodge, Maria regaled Mary with tales of Rosings which grew increasingly more fanciful. “Charlotte and Mr. Collins were walking on the path to Rosings during a blue moon. The lion statues came to life and attacked Mr. Collins. Fortunately they got so full and bloated after eating him, they just walked back to their posts and returned to statue form the next morning.”

Maria shrieked with laughter as Mary extemporized another, “On the grounds of Rosings, deep within the hedge maze, a shrub grows berries of such potent poison that one drop could level an elephant. Of course it took two to finish off Mr. Collins.”

“In the pond at Rosings, there is a saber toothed shark which Lady Catherine de Bourgh saddles like a horse and rides around the pond. One time, it jumped out and ate Mr. Collins. Then it got sick on the yard, and all the plants died.”

“Free of the dead weight which was Mr. Collins, Charlotte stormed into Rosings and demanded a modicum of respect from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, her robes and hair flying in the wind caused by Charlotte’s dramatic entrance through the hole left by the dragon Charlotte had just slayed.”

Mary grabbed her friend’s hand while gulping in air, roaring with delight at their tales, all with Charlotte emerging victorious, and without Mr. Collins. Only Maria got to see this whimsical side of Mary.

Without Maria, Mary would have felt utterly alone for many years now. Mary never quite fit in with her family. Both of her pairs of sisters, the younger and the older, were happily best friends without her. Kitty and Lydia, and their mother, shared their mutual obsession with men and marriage, and had no sense of propriety. Five sisters all out at the same time, pestering near strangers about throwing balls and chasing soldiers down the streets of Meryton. It was an embarrassing spectacle. How else can Mary distance herself from their traveling side show of improprieties more effectively than to quote from Fordyce’s Sermons to Young Women with more accuracy than her dear Cousin Collins? At least with Lydia now married, Kitty has been brought to heel somewhat by their father. But who can temper their mother’s insatiable hunger for sons in law?

The two male swans hiss and snort at each other while flapping their wings, circling each other in and out of the pond. Mary wonders whether the display is more for each other, or the female. Kitty shrieks and backs away from their perch when the males approach their side of the pond, “Are they going to fight now? Is there going to be blood and feathers everywhere?” Kitty’s veil of concern slips as she shows her appreciation for this utterly romantic action on display. “Wouldn’t it be romantic for two men to fight over you, Mary?” Kitty does not seem to notice Mary’s lack of response. A burst of wind blows seed pods onto the girls and Kitty is engrossed with removing them from her hair.

The sisters debate which of their current and future brothers in law is most like these swans, or are other foul more fair assessments. Kitty offers, “Darcy is a kingfisher, definitely.”

“I can see that.” responds Mary, “How about Bingley; is he a robin?”

“Well, the early robin gets the prize. And for dear Wickham? I thought he was a pheasant, but really, he’s a pigeon.” Kitty grins and looks over to her sister, who returns a rare smile. Maybe something good can come of Lydia’s rapid abandonment of Kitty to become the new Mrs. Wickham, as these sisters forge a new bond.

Mere months ago, Mary knows that Kitty would have balked at the notion of journeying to Meryton with only Mary. But with youngest daughter Lydia now married and Jane and Lizzie both engaged, Kitty sought out Mary. Their father strictly forbids the girls from solo journeys. Mary is Kitty’s only means of escape, even if it means enduring Mary’s dour proclamations on nearly everything. Of course Mary knows that her family finds her tedious. But how else can she assure that she will not become her mother’s next matchmaking project? Mary does tend to tone it down when she is alone with Kitty though, as still teenaged Kitty is hardly in a position to attempt to set Mary up with some eligible man.

Father has stepped in to temper mother’s matchmaking somewhat after Lizzie chastised all of them for their reckless behavior, which nearly cost Jane her fiance. But honestly, were Lizzie’s and Jane’s behavior in landing their respective fiances all that much better? Yes, Jane and Eliza were more subtle in their efforts to corner the market on men of means, but the size of a man’s wallet was quite blatantly their most valued feature in a future mate. Having the personality of a bowl a tepid soup did nothing to dissuade Jane in her quest to win Mr. Bingley’s love. How many months did she pine away, waiting for him to call on her while she camped out in Uncle Gardiner’s house in London?

And Lizzie, father’s darling, fell for a wolf in Red Coat clothing. But despite Mary’s gentle reminders to Lizzie of Fanny Burney’s warnings about the brittle and beautiful nature of female virtue, Lizzie has thrown herself clearly into the path of Mr. Darcy in a rather daring display. Her audacious pursuit of the rather moody but unquestionably wealthy Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy prompted none other than Maria’s own favorite muse, the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh to pay her a late night visit at Longbourn. Lizzie had thought him too proud until she got a tour of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy’s gorgeous estate. Then all of sudden, Darcy started looking much more appealing. And now it’s love, apparently.

A fox appears from the woods across the pond. All six swans draw together, heedless of their prior internal dispute. They amass on the far shore, flapping their wings and channeling all of their energy on intimidating the vixen. Their campaign succeeds; the fox turns tail and disappears. Kitty exhales after having held her breath with fear during the exchange. “Mercy, that was close. Six swans against a single fox would have been a close fight. We came to Meryton for company and news, not to witness nature’s struggle for survival.”

Mary cherishes that her purpose for the sisters’ journey to Meryton was a success. Contrary to Kitty’s belief, Mary had not come for the gossip. Mary clutches in her satchel the copy of Diederot’s “La Religieuse” that her Aunt was able to acquire for her. She had specifically hoped for the original French version, both as an opportunity to practice her fledgling French and to assure that none of her sisters would disturb this volume. Not that it was likely in any event, shelved between Mary’s many tomes of sermons and other hortative screeds. Mary’s bookshelf was strictly her domain without having to request such. Mary has cultivated a public face akin to a puritanical wall, which only a very hearty soul would attempt to scale.

The first male mute swan has regained his position in front of the female. He appears victorious, as the female mute swan is now mirroring his head positions and they start their ungainly mating dance. “I hope you’ve selected wisely” Mary mutters to the swans, knowing that although they are technically the property of King George, they now own each other. Even a swan’s lifetime can be an excruciatingly long dance with a foolish partner.

Kitty gathers up a huge bouquet of flowers, and places one behind Mary’s ear, rejoicing at love blooming all around her. The sisters resume their trudge back to Longbourn, their nature watching mission accomplished. Mary shudders at the thought of Kitty joining the ranks of her romantically claimed sisters, leaving Mary all alone with the full focus of Mrs. Bennet’s life mission. Mary yearns to keep Kitty at Longbourn as a buffer for as long as possible. But Kitty is a pleasant and fair young lady; her marriage prospects are only increased by Jane and Lizzie’s engagements to prominent gentlemen of society. Mary cannot rely on Kitty as her only defense from Mrs. Bennet’s nonstop barrage of marital hectoring for long.

On this front, Mary has had to swallow her own pride and cultivate a persona of vanity. She practices piano pieces that she does not enjoy, purely to be accomplished enough to be a horrid bore while in mixed company. She has memorized long judgmental passages from all of the most moralizing of writers, and can recite them by rote at the slightest provocation. Mary strives to maintain her own dignity, her own knowledge of her true talents, her true feelings, but she buries them deep.

Their neighbor from down the road, William Peacock, a young man of 22, notices the sisters approach while walking the grounds with his hounds. “Hello to the misses Bennet; what brings you out today? I’m scouting for an upcoming hunting expedition.” The dogs jump and whine while William approaches the girls. Kitty ruffles one of the hound’s fur while Mary steps back onto the road, attempting to avoid a slobbery snout.

Kitty responds, “We’re on our way back from Meryton, visiting our Aunt Philips. We just saw swans pairing up!”

“It is a beautiful day. Speaking of pairing, are you two planning to attend the ball at the Rodgers estate next weekend?” William positions himself between the sisters, facing Kitty and trying to make eye contact while Kitty is now sitting on the ground, dandling the youngest of the hounds, still a pup.

Undaunted by William’s backside, Mary answers, “Yes, I believe that our father has indicated that we shall be in attendance. And you?”

“Yes, myself and my sisters and brother. I do hope that you will save me a dance, Kitty. And Mary, I always look forward to hearing you play the pianoforte.”

After walking a fair distance away from the Peacock estate, Kitty confides to Mary, “I would much rather save a dance for his older brother, who will inherit, as William is studying for the seminary.”

Regarding the pianoforte, Mary’s public persona of prickly arrogance is on frequent display at large gatherings around town, particularly where eligible young men may have gathered. How better can one say “move along, find a more suitable match” than with long, undanceable concertos paired with a weak singing voice and endless rounds of barely encouraged encores. Her father showed considerable nerve to proclaim before the entire assembly at Netherfield, that Mary had “delighted us long enough” and that Mary should “let the other ladies have time to exhibit.” Not only had father made it clear that Mary’s playing was not a delight, but that she was denying other girls the spotlight. To be so publicly rebuked, rather than a quiet aside; Mary knows she is neither of her parents’ favorite. She refused to allow the hurt to show. There is no quarter for sensibilities in the Bennet household. Mary has cultured a mystique of logic defeating feeling, a shell of cool reserve, oozing with judgment. But this was not her true self. She hides her true self from almost everyone, as her true self would be a liability.

Upon their return to Longbourn, Kitty heads back into the house, eager to discuss the village of Meryton’s collective thoughts regarding Jane and Elizabeth’s upcoming wedding plans, future balls, and all other means by which men and women meet to mingle. Mary opts instead to continue her walk through the garden. She pauses to watch two swans flying in tandem. Mary approaches the garden shed as she consults her pocket watch, and then continues in, hoping to read her at least a part of new book in seclusion. The unused lawn chairs are stored in this shed, and Mary makes herself comfortable on a chaise positioned under the shed’s only window. The window rests over 8 feet off the ground near the top of the shed. It gives good light, but no view of the yard. Mary has cleared a path between the various lawn equipment to her favorite summer and fall reading perch.

The thought that Mary, or any girl for that matter, would wish to learn French, to learn to paint, to read about science and the natural world, such as ornithology, all of that seemed terribly boring and selfish to Mary’s mother. Her father would humor Mary with free reign in his library as long as she did not corner him into in-depth conversations about, well, anything. But it is her Aunt Philips who has truly supported Mary’s endeavors, her wishes to study more, to learn for her own sake, and not merely to make herself a more attractive package for a potential mate. Can there be no joy without coupledom?

If only Mary had been born Mark. What could Mark Bennet do that Mary could never aspire to accomplish? Learning for its own sake would be commended rather than ridiculed, for one. Most importantly, Mark Bennet could retain Longbourn in the Bennet family: be a hero to Mrs. Bennet rather than a bitter disappointment. And what else would be available to Mark Bennet that is not available to Mary Bennet? Her thoughts drift again to Maria Lucas.

As she hears footsteps approach across the cobblestone path in the backyard from the direction of Lucas Lodge, Mary repeats one of her favorite private refrains from Sappho’s *Ode to Aphrodite*:

“Come to me now once again and release me from grueling anxiety.

All that my heart longs for, fulfill.”

“And be yourself my ally in love’s battle.” responds Maria Lucas, also a devotee of Sappho, as she opens the door and enters the Longbourn garden shed, unobserved by others.