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## “Always unguarded and often uncivil”: A Case for Lydia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

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## “Always unguarded and often uncivil”: A Case for Lydia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

### Abstract

Despite decades of feminist scholarship, Lydia Bennet has consistently been taken at Jane Austen’s word: she is viewed as capricious, difficult, and silly, and in most cases found to be deserving of her fate. But with the adaptation *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lydia became the character most likely to inspire a heightened emotional bond with viewers. Because of the show’s format, Lydia’s voice and experiences became more central, and were conveyed with greater sympathy than prior adaptations. Against all anticipation, many viewers immediately identified not with Lizzie, but with Lydia. My paper explores the cultural contexts surrounding the web adaptation and examines the heated discourses on Lydia’s character circulating in fan blogs, *YouTube* comments, and discussion boards (preserved in their original form), and ultimately considers how this change in feeling might cast new reflections upon the original Lydia of *Pride and Prejudice*.

### Keywords

Austen Studies, Youth Culture, Pride and Prejudice, The Lizzie Bennet Diaries

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### Cover Page Footnote

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Poor Lydia Bennet. Sister to the beloved character Elizabeth in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia is flighty, vacuous, and extremely effective at raising sisterly—and readerly!—ire. She is described throughout the novel as ignorant, uncontrolled, clamorous, silly, self-willed, and inattentive. If Austen's book is a tableau of moral choices and consequences, Lydia indisputably makes the worst possible decisions: at barely sixteen, she runs off with the scheming rake Wickham, and yields her sexual virtue without any later expression of regret. To her sisters, Lydia's effusive pride upon her return is as taxing as her initial disappearance and seduction. As Elizabeth laments, "It was not to be supposed that time would give Lydia that embarrassment, from which she had been so wholly free at first" (Austen 205). The catastrophe of Lydia thus shifts away from her elopement and toward her unyielding joy, and can be resolved only by her shame. Throughout Lydia's arc, Austen showcases society's tendency to be mortified by the giddiness of adolescent girls, and the persistent wish to break them. My paper explores how this desire for Lydia's distress is given form in the modern web adaptation *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013), and how the series' transformation of Lydia's character casts new reflections upon the original Lydia of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Lydia's youth is her defining feature, being both her charm and her trap. As Austen first describes her:

The two youngest of the family, Catherine and Lydia, were particularly frequent in these attentions; their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt. (20)

This description of excitable shallowness sets the tone for most visual adaptations of Lydia. On the screen, she tends to interrupt serenity. In the 1995 BBC miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, we encounter her first as an ear-piercing cry that punctures Elizabeth's tranquil walk through her family's courtyard. When physically rendered, her frenetic moves distract from attempts at stillness or repose; whether she shouts with exuberance or shrilly laments, her high-pitched voice intrudes upon her sisters' intimate conversation. These filmic techniques mirror Austen's careful writing, and ensure that Lydia will forever annoy—and, as we learn from the viewers, annoy she does! Under the opening scene of the BBC adaptation posted to YouTube, one viewer exclaims, "good lord! I HATE HATE HATE Lydia," neatly capturing the extreme feelings of aggravation Lydia tends to provoke (McKenzie Gak).<sup>1</sup>

Even the most sympathetic critics are easily entangled by Austen's deft framing of Lydia's character. Scott Fitzgibbon, for instance, calls Lydia an "unsteady and unreliable person, and also the person whose mind is a constant whirl" (596). Elvira Casal describes her as "wild, unreflecting, and sexually precocious," explaining that her ready laughter is "a sign both of foolishness—of lack of reflection—and of rampant sexuality." Markus Wohlfeil and Susan Whelan take a softer tack, but still call her only "young, naïve, and just romantically in love with love itself rather than any particular man" (140). These perspectives demonstrate the limited range of sympathy evoked by Lydia: she annoys, she repels, she vexes. As Shawn Lisa Maurer explains, "Lydia may be hard to take seriously because, in her adolescent egotism and refusal to change, she resembles less the erring characters in Austen's published works than the famously unrepentant figures from Austen's juvenilia" (34). There is a remarkable tendency, despite decades of feminist treatments that redeem unpalatable female characters, to take Lydia at face value. What conditions must be in play for Lydia to provoke compassion, or even to become likeable?

One answer can be found in the web adaptation *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, which unexpectedly led to a dramatic reversal of audience sympathies. Each episode of the series was filmed in the style of a video-log set in the present-day, where the intrepid Lizzie Bennet shows off her acerbic wit by commenting upon the goings-on in her family to her online audience from the safe confines of her bedroom. In addition to the primary YouTube channel, Lizzie and her fellow characters were given an expansive internet presence, including blogs, Twitter accounts, YouTube profiles, and the occasional offshoot channel to interact with their audience and fully situate the characters within an integrated online world. Lydia's character benefitted enormously from her increased presence and the opportunities to display her cheerful personality directly rather than through Lizzie's mediation.

Like her first appearance in the BBC production, Lydia bursts onto the scene, invading Lizzie's bedroom and her new web series in one fell swoop. Without any preamble, Lydia slams open the door and rapidly launches into the latest gossip—"Did Mom tell you about who just bought that mansion in Netherfield...So this guy, his name is Bing Lee and he is rich, hot, and...?" (My Name). Lizzie reluctantly fills in the final word, "Single?" as Lydia primps in front of the camera and high-fives Charlotte, Lizzie's camerawoman (My Name). As in the book, Lydia is uncontainable. But though Lydia's central traits remain the same, her boisterous vanity makes her one of the most adored characters in the series. As one commentor wrote in the YouTube comment section of the above scene, "I should feel slightly stupid for smacking my computer screen to high-five Lydia [especially since this is a rewatch for me] but I REGRET NOTHING" (J

Arduino). Some fans of the novel were startled to find that Lydia was now firmly centered in their affections: “I’m not sure if I said this or not in one of the previous videos, but Lydia (/Kitty) is my all-time least favourite P&P character, and even possibly my least favourite literary character. But, in these videos, Lydia is HILARIOUS. You just want to hug her and then take away all of her liquor stash hiding in her closet” (Courtney Hutchinson). Another happily writes, “Watching this video I just have to say again, I LOVE the LBD version of Lydia!” (Wokanshutaideo Snape). Devoney Looser describes the long history of Austen enthusiasts as “the most creative, active, visible followers” (4). Fans of the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* were no exception, and their excitable, emoji-laden chatter infused the modernized Lydia with new vitality.

Rather than a mark of shame, viewers see Lydia’s ignorance and idleness as the fundamental reality of young adult life, allowing her “high animal spirits” to become an appealing mark of distinction (Austen 31). Where Lizzie projects a *Daria*-esque reserve and dry wit, Lydia exudes unrestrained delight. Her enthusiasm immediately created an emotional bond between the character and her audience. When, in the second episode, Lizzie calls her younger sister a “stupid whore-y slut,” the viewers vehemently rose to her defense, many emphasizing their love of the character: “Don’t call Lydia a slut T.T I love LBD Lydia so much. Melts into a puddle of tears and internet hugs” (Problematic; Wokanshutaideo Snape). Along with their expressions of adoration, many viewers reveal their familiarity with the show’s source material and key plot points, one angrily quoting from the script in her comment, writing: “‘UUGH! LYDIA’S BEING A STUPID WHOR-Y SLUT AGAIN!’ Elizabeth Bennet, you will regret calling your sister that” (Natalie Gordon). Some viewers combined their protests of the script’s misogyny with calls for sibling solidarity, one writing “It really bothers me that she calls Lydia a ‘whore-y slut.’ It’s just completely unnecessary. I mean, you don’t have to ‘know’ your sister to not slut shame her. I get that the point is that Lizzie grew as a person and is very judgmental at the beginning, but I still hate it” (CarCrashRhetoric). Lizzie’s dialogue—and especially her epithet toward her sister—accidentally rearranged viewer loyalties, and comments reveal that many viewers felt alienated by her derision toward Lydia: “Wow re-watching this and realizing that there are so many cringe-worthy put-downs of Lydia by Lizzie, ugh :-( she’s actually pretty mean and self-righteous” (BoniBee). While the general characteristics of each sister align quite closely to their literary origins, Lizzie’s prudishness set her at odds with an audience that has embraced sex-positivity and mutual support, leading many viewers to criticize the fractious sibling dynamic set up by Lizzie’s words. As one writes, “Hank and Bernie: This is such a great concept, but can we maybe cut out the slut shaming in the writing? We already see enough of that in traditional

media. Plus, yes, Lizzie and Lydia don't have the best relationship, but they're still sisters! Cheers” (Beckmannm). Against all anticipation, a significant cross-section of the audience identified not with Lizzie, but with Lydia.

The show’s creators were attentive to viewer responses, and their fans’ outcries about Lizzie’s “stupid whore-y slut” line was one of the first indications that they would need to tread more carefully with Lydia’s character, and to rethink their script’s uncritical incorporation of disdain for young women’s sexuality. As Misty Krueger describes, “fans are shaping online Austen culture through the kinds of information they post and to which they respond approvingly,” and their extraordinary disapproval exerted significant pressure on the show’s writers (380). Bernie Su, one of the show’s creators, publicly apologized for their misstep: “The slut shaming critique is definitely something we’re aware of and honestly one of the few disappointments we have with the reception of the series. I’d like to clarify that we are not defending it. **The critique is a fair one. It really is something we simply missed on.**”<sup>2</sup> He continues,

I’d like you (and the rest of the fans) to know that we at The LBD team have definitely been making adjustments to future episodes regarding this matter. I don’t think you’ll see us toning down Lydia but you will see us adjusting Lizzie’s choice of words and actions in dealing with her. I will say that Lydia provides an amazing foil and contrast to Lizzie in our version and I hope you and the fans will continue to enjoy the head butting that these two have throughout the story.

From that point forward, the creators pulled back on the language of sexual shame, instead emphasizing Lydia’s insecurity and growing recklessness rather than her sexuality as her core weakness. This dynamic illustrates the creators’ responsiveness to fan interventions and highlights the collaborative re-formation of Lydia’s character. But more crucially, the changes show that fans were already defensive of Lydia before the show softened its treatment of her character.

Their defense of Lydia should not have taken the creative team by surprise. In the world of user-generated content, teenaged girls and young women have remained a predominant and skillful force driving the popularity of video-logs. In the years surrounding the production of the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, girls made up a significant cross-section of YouTube’s audience. According to data analysis performed by Eric Blattberg in 2015, girls and young women aged 13-24 made up 57.1 percent of viewers of beauty-oriented YouTube channels in that year. Makeup and hair tutorials, fashion advice, cosmetic reviews, and shopping “hauls” together constituted one corner of a vibrant cultural scene dominated by

girls and young women. According to Laura Jeffries, between 2008 and 2011, “over 250,000 short videos known as ‘hauls’ [were] posted on YouTube” (59). In this popular genre, shoppers unpack the contents of their shopping sprees before their virtual audience. When Lydia takes over Lizzie’s vlog in the twentieth episode ostensibly to unpack her own haul before the camera, it is clear that the writers were making deliberate connections between Lydia and the substantial online presence of teens and young women. Lydia is highly self-aware in this moment, recognizing that while shopping hauls are extraordinarily popular, they are also considered shallow and silly—especially by her sister. After showing off a few items, she quickly pivots, laughingly explaining that “now that Lizzie has stopped watching” she can launch into her true purpose: enumerating the proper rules for acquiring alcohol and for encouraging a wealthy gentleman to host a party at his home (Enjoy). The audience was highly appreciative, in many cases closely identifying with her youthful combination of liveliness and insecurity. “People dislike Lydia, forgetting that she’s just a young, impressionable party-girl. She’s no different from any other girl her age. I love Lydia!!” (Breanna Waymyers). In response to one viewer noting her surprise at how much she loves the updated character when she “can’t stand the original P&P Lydia,” another responds that her shift in sentiments makes sense, because “There’s more space [now] for girls to be flirtatious, spontaneous, funny, and even sort of superficial :)” (Heowa; Marina Vieira Souza)

But while the above commenter’s appraisal of girls’ increasing social freedom might be correct to a point, even those who amass large followings online must constantly reassert their right to live in public. Just as they are mocked for lacking intellectual substance, girls with an internet presence are often dismissed as whores or sluts, many times by adult commentators. And, as these girls are well aware, they are expected to retain a degree of innocence even as they are harassed with requests for nudes or sent unwanted explicit photographs. Even some older male viewers, seemingly unaware that this was fiction, awkwardly courted the main character. One begins with the inauspicious statement “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I wanted to tell you that you are an extremely pretty girl” (ParallaxVue). He continues, “I’m not being a schmoozer or a letch [...] I might have dated your mom, lol!” (ParallaxVue).

Whether sexualized or castigated, teenaged girls and young women often find themselves in the crosshairs of social scrutiny. The 2013 *Times* cover story “The Me, Me, Me Generation,” (released during the second season of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) featuring a cover with an adolescent girl, cell phone extended to take a selfie, was only one among such ambivalent think-pieces. Young women’s talents and youthfulness have been capitalized upon by large social media corporations

while the girls themselves are still popularly dismissed as being dimwitted and superficial. For instance, Laura Jeffries harshly critiques the interactive elements of online beauty communities, complaining that rather than harnessing the liberating potential of digital spaces, teens and young women instead reify existing superficial, consumption-driven discourse. In her words,

These user-generated videos and this largely uncensored forum could be used to regain control of the personal image landscape which has been designed by corporations and imposed through popular media. But the comments deliver disappointingly little more than vapid confirmations of the thinness, big-eyedness, cuteness, or general corporate trendiness of the much-revered hauler. In the comment space, which looks most like a series of text messages and IM's with the expected abbreviations and initialisms, there is very little thoughtful conversation. What I mean is that there is no productive questioning, no broaching of important issues—instead, there are pages and pages of compliments, thank-you's, and genuinely empty catch-all positives and intensifiers such as the ubiquitous 'soooo cute.' (62)

Though Jeffries' categorical focus on user-generated content might appear broad, her attention is so narrow that she fails to account for the genre's discursive expectations, and the movement of participants through various online forums. The particular spaces she describes are actively structured around an economy of positivity, where compliments circulate as a kind of currency. A makeup or fashion video is a place to enjoy exchanging techniques, color schemes, favored products, and flattery; a video discussing day-to-day experiences or offering polemics is a place for conversations that are more ideological or political in nature. Because her observations account only for conversation threads centered around beauty and fashion rather than following the participants' various contributions across other diverse genres of videos and blogs, Jeffries fails to recognize that these communities are overlapping and porous.

Teenaged girls are caught in a matrix of opposing needs: to simultaneously gratify social norms in their performance of identity and resist the hegemonizing forces imposed by well-oiled influencing machines, all while inexpertly navigating the liminal zone between adulthood and youth. Contemporary adolescents tend to document these disparate drives through content affiliations. Tumblr users, for instance, regularly re-blog pointed observations pulled from sources as diverse as academia, twitter, or the then-thriving blogosphere. A passage from Julia Serano's 2013 monograph *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements more Inclusive* is an example of public scholarship that has been steadily circulated on Tumblr for over a decade, over 50,000 combined comments and re-blogs as of



May 1, 2023. Serano captures the contradictory expectations that might shift and change but never dwindle as they haunt women from childhood to advanced age, writing:

We trans women are made to teeter on this tightrope, not because we are transsexuals, but because we are women. This is the same double bind that forces teenage girls to negotiate their way between virgin and whore, that forces female politicians and business women to be aggressive without being seen as a bitch, and to be feminine enough not to emasculate their alpha male colleagues, without being so girly as to undermine their own authority.” (qtd in *Bisexual Books*)

Likewise, many young bloggers capture the flexibility of thinking that permits young women to participate in rituals of mutual objectification while simultaneously critiquing their necessity. One teenaged Tumblr user, whose entries often cycle between social criticism and selfies featuring dramatic makeup, clearly articulates this conundrum when she writes,

Social media is horrible for girls for many reasons!!!! It obviously makes girls compare to others and usually results in self-esteem issues. And girls, we are doing exactly what the patriarchy does to us: objectify. We will only view woman as pretty or cute, only pay attention to their appearance, completely subconsciously. Oh that girl is so pretty!! Nice thing to say but what else is nice about these woman? Beautiful is such a common compliment that it makes it seem like fuck what the else even matters?? (Lostgrrrrl)

Another blogger in her early twenties traces the forked paths that many girls feel obligated to traverse, explaining:

being a girl and hitting puberty is so traumatic. you go from being a genderless little free thing to being hit with shaving and makeup and growing breasts and skincare and menstruation and suddenly being sexualised when like a few years ago you could take your shirt off to play in the stream and trade yugioh cards with the boys and come home covered in mud and not even think about it. and then you spend years hating being a girl and hating everything puberty did to you and wishing you could be a boy or be completely genderless again and it takes you Many years to come to terms with yourself Or you simply try to Lean In to everything and do makeup tutorials on YouTube and claim it's for fun. like how can this be treated as normal (Dreamingbyblondie)

These writers—respectively around sixteen and twenty-two at their publication date—describe these pressures as intrusive and immediate, un-buffered by time or intellectual detachment. They see that they are being exploited for their energy, skill, youth, and sometimes beauty, all while most of them will never receive any material benefit, neither financial rewards nor social acclaim. The economy of praise so off-putting to Jeffries at least presents one route of escape from what Aasha Shaik, a Girl Advocate for the United Nations Working Group on Girls, describes as the “seemingly endless girl-on-girl hatred and critique” that surrounds young women online. Of course, these pressures do not come solely from other girls. As Liz Pelly writes, “media aimed at girls is routinely condescending and duplicitous” and “remains stacked against young women, who are too often presented with a brand of bankable, *Lean-In* lite feminism” (37). Girls and young women receive these signals from all sides, and even if they do not completely absorb them, the messages still shape their perceptions and identities. It is important to see that the Bennet sisters’ real-world counterparts are both impressionable and *cognizant* of their impressionability. They exude a complicated blend of excitement, embarrassment, enthusiasm, and—most strikingly—shame, all of which saturate their relationship to the process of growing up.

The sisters of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* participate in these ongoing conversations occurring within communities of girls on the cusp of maturity. Of the three sisters, Lydia’s insecurities are the most severe. As she nears her twenty-first birthday, she feels herself under the mounting contradictory pressures to perform her established role of the bubbly party girl, but also to adopt a more subdued, mature persona. She was stung when Darcy referred to her contemptuously as “energetic,” an insult further compounded when Caroline Bingley referred to her as “an embarrassment” (*Are You Kidding Me*). Thus, when Lizzie herself admits that she finds Lydia to be embarrassing, the response was swift, with most viewers identifying with Lydia’s despair. In the seventy-third episode titled “2+1,” Lizzie offers Lydia a belated birthday present. Lydia is jubilant, first exclaiming “Yay, I knew you’d get me something awesome, thank you!” and then happily mumbling “this is nice, I like it” while crinkling the spiraled cellophane bows in her fingers (2+1). After peeling the wrapping paper away to reveal a book, Lydia slowly reads the title aloud “Where Did I Park My Car?: A Party Girl’s Guide to Becoming a Successful Adult” (2+1). After a momentary pause, she bursts into laughter and tells her sister, “You’re so good at joke gifts!” only to be visibly crushed when Lizzie immediately responds with “It’s not a joke gift. You know, I thought, you’re twenty-one now and a new year might be a good time for you to find that new, more grown-up Lydia” (2+1). Lizzie continues, “Maybe it would be good for you to not be so...energetic...all

the time” (2+1). Lizzie, as before, inhabits the position of adult scorn rather than empathy toward her sister’s youthful blunders, and her concerns (though sincere) further soured many fans’ feelings toward her.

Lydia’s devastation accelerated her downward spiral and catalyzed a new wave of impassioned fan responses: “OMG REWATCHING THIS BROKE MY HEART SO HARD Gonna go scream-cry into a pillow now” (Manar). Viewers quickly sympathized with Lydia’s abrupt awakening to her sister’s disapproval, condemning Lizzie’s refusal to leverage even a mild defense on Lydia’s behalf.

Third time watching, and still...."energetic?" Gutted. Lydia can be thoughtless, insane, and even (if unintentionally) a bit selfish. But she's so loyal and sensitive, can't Lizzie see how much that cut her :( (Brooke W)<sup>3</sup>

Lydia’s unsteady, unsuccessful attempts to balance youth and maturity reminded many viewers of their own induction into legal adulthood, and the commonplaceness of tumbling into dangerous overconsumption and frivolity. As one commenter writes,

This episode still hurts my heart. I think most people forget that Lydia is just turning 21 [...] and most of us are raging monsters at that age, drinking everything we can get our hands on because we finally can. Most of the people I know have done some terribly ridiculous things at that age, many of them they either can't remember too well or wish they could regret [sic.]. It's like a rite of passage. (Karintha)

But even those viewers less captivated by Lydia found themselves appalled by Lizzie’s unkindness. One succinctly captures this sentiment, explaining that Lizzie should have followed Lydia’s lead and agreed the book was merely a joke, writing: “I don’t like Lydia but honestly I feel so stung on her behalf. Lizzie should’ve taken the goddamn out” (Tinah Zaeba).

Lizzie’s betrayal is the last straw for Lydia, who has felt increasingly abandoned by her sisters, and is now confirmed as being wanting in their estimation. Her fraying support system leaves her more vulnerable to the approach of George Wickham, whose abusive personality quickly sends up red flags for everyone in the audience, but not Lydia. When Lydia re-introduces Wickham to her viewers, he presents himself as penitent, providing a version of his history that mirrors Lydia’s own: a story of being rejected by family members who are either unwilling or unable to see his efforts to improve himself. As one commentor aptly notes, “He is playing RIGHT into her vulnerabilities. The manipulation is

sickening every time” (NaTeesha85). Another, more humorously, exclaims, “Wow, he is SLICK. That is the slickest spin of the truth I've seen since the election. WOW, that was stupid well played” (Lizzie Crowe ). Many viewers address her directly, one pleading “Lydiaaaaaaaa! NO! Don't fall for his pretty charm! [...] Lydia you are smarter than this, use that wonderful brain that we know is inside that beautiful head of yours,” while another merely repeats, “nope nope nope nope nope nope nope! (that is all I can say)” (How Roode; donna ling).

The fans’ quick awareness of his manipulative behavior springs, in part, from the network of support that the internet can provide for young people. Girls trade stories and advice to keep their heads above water. Indeed, a frequently linked-to article on *Scarleteen* (one of the more comprehensive online resources for sexual education) is titled “Why I Deeply Dislike Your Older Boyfriend.” There, the site’s founder, Heather Corinna, writes that,

I feel like he chose you because he sees or senses something in you that makes you more vulnerable to his bullshit: like that your parents aren’t around, seem to be clueless, or set their standards for themselves so low that they also have low standards for you. Like that you’re already wounded in some way that makes it tougher for you to recognize danger when it’s whispering sweet nothings in your ear.

Unlike many of Austen’s other teenaged protagonists who offer satisfying stories of growth through self-reflection—Marianne Dashwood, Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Moreland—Lydia lacks adult oversight, receiving little social scaffolding or guidance from her parents or elder sisters. In the novel, her most crucial decisions and actions take place largely off the page, with the readers experiencing only the aftermath. By inverting this and giving Lydia her own offshoot channel, the web series provided Lydia with the outlet for her thoughts and the sounding board she was denied in the novel.

Wickham’s return transformed the show’s comment section into a network of support, spurring a succession of deeply affective personal disclosures. These contributions serve to commiserate with former victims of abuse and manipulation, and also to teach those who are unfamiliar with the signs. As one person wrote,

I don't have the words for how I feel about this. It's just so raw, and it reminds me of the justifications I made for staying in the relationship I was in when this video was made. [...] I still struggle, four years later, to actually call that relationship or anything within it abusive, but it was

definitely unhealthy in ways that I see reflected in these videos, and it's left scars. These videos are always tough to watch for that reason. (ramywiles)

In response, one viewer offers a hopeful reminder that by circulating these stories, others might be spared from similar experiences, saying “It's so relatable that it really makes me afraid of being too gullible to not see through someone like Wickham. These videos are actually pretty educational. ;)” (Sing4God87). The conversations unfolding within the fandom created a repository of insights into the unique experiences of girls and young women, allowing the participants to avoid what Akane Kanai describes as the “‘Girl Power’ discourse” that “is predicated on a binary, complementary twin discourse which emphasizes the ever-present proximity of girls to failure and danger” (86). Within the fandom, potential dangers can be acknowledged and (to some degree) ameliorated without reducing girls to mere helpless objects.

Over the next few episodes, Wickham coaxes Lydia into placing all of her trust and affection solely with himself, urging her to refuse contact with her sisters and friends. Under Wickham’s thumb, Lydia’s vibrancy is quickly depleted, replaced by vacant stares and long pauses that transform every statement into a question. In “Good Enough,” the final episode of her offshoot channel, Lydia hesitantly declares her love for Wickham, and goes on to describe how she “always thought family was the one thing you could count on – ‘solid ground’ or whatever.” “But,” she continues,

...I know every movie ever always said it was about true love, but that just always seemed so silly and narrow and, um... isolating, but... I think I get it now. Family’s something you’re born into. They don’t have to—they might not always be there for you. But someone who finds you, and chooses you and... loves you... because they want to, not because they’re supposed to, I mean, that’s something.

After a long pause, she explains, “I feel good enough for somebody for once.” At the moment she uttered those words, Lydia had not yet learned that Wickham had already posted a video online of the two of them having sex, with a countdown timer set to go public on Valentine’s Day.

Lydia’s confusion, her fragility, her emphasis upon needing to be valued, and needing someone—anyone, really—to support her almost precisely reflect the devastation of the real-life story of Amanda Todd. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012, four months before Lydia’s discovery of Wickham’s publication of their sex tape, fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd recorded her last video, titled “My story:

Struggling, bullying, suicide, self harm,” under the username theSomebodytoknow. In the recording, she quietly holds hand-written flashcards up to the camera to recount a disturbing timeline of unthinkable harassment. Two years prior, an adult man convinced then-13-year-old Amanda her to raise her shirt during their video chat session. He later attempted to use the photos he took to blackmail her to “put on a show” for him (theSomebodytoknow). When she refused, he circulated the photo of her bare chest to her fellow students, friends, and family. Although she switched schools a year later to escape the bullying she experienced from her peers, she explains that her harasser “came back with my new list of friends and school. But made a facebook page. My boobs were his profile pic...” (theSomebodytoknow). After multiple attempts to rebuild her life in several new locations, Todd discovered that she could not escape those digital traces: “Why do I get this? I messed up but why follow me. I left your guys city...” (theSomebodytoknow). She describes how her social isolation led her to make multiple attempts to end her life. She signs off: “I have nobody... I need someone :( My name is Amanda Todd” (theSomebodytoknow). A month later, Todd’s body was discovered in her bedroom. Her death was determined to be by suicide.

Amanda Todd’s death reverberated through the online spaces of teenagers. A quick search of her name brings countless then-teen bloggers—mostly written by girls in high school—to the internet’s surface. Many describe a feeling of sickened commiseration, sharing accounts of similar abuse and harassment they experienced at the hands of older men. Others, more bracingly, offer screeds that explain why Amanda Todd deserves no one’s sympathy. Todd’s legacy remains, for her video is still regularly copied and reposted by young women who identify with her trauma. Todd’s video statement also created large ripples across the internet felt by many members of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*’ audience. Several fans made explicit connections between the two events, one writing that a “couple months ago I also thought that [a] sex tape might be Lydia’s downfall” (Ekth). She explains,

I came to this idea of a sex tape when I read this article about a young girl who was filmed by a stranger on the internet, who then blackmailed her and released the videos. When the tapes were released, she was slut-shamed by her peers, even after moving schools. Most of you already know that this is Amanda Todd's story. (Ekth)

Similar resonances struck other viewers, one writing that “After her last video this has me all worried about things like possible suicide attempts. I hope they don’t go that dark” (Mediumsizedfountain).

While Lydia's storyline avoids the darker element of suicide, the resemblance between the real girl and the fictional character persists. Upon rewatching Amanda Todd's video, I am struck again by her youthfulness, from her tiny undeveloped frame to her awkward teenage features. At fifteen, she is still a child. Fifteen is also the age at which the original Lydia Bennet begins her story (and barely sixteen when it concludes with her marriage). Consider that first Lydia for a moment: pretty and vivacious, yet still a child in manner and form. The resulting image draws attention to a persistent failure in the character's representation. TV and film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* usually hold a fidelity to the plot of the book, and maintain the character's age in her original span of fifteen to sixteen years old. But, importantly, they hold no compunction with casting actresses who are significantly older than the character. A quick survey of the most popular productions across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries confirms this trend. Jenna Malone was the youngest actress playing Lydia, at twenty-one years old at her movie's release in 2005. Julie Sawalha, in the ever-perennial 1995 BBC miniseries was among the eldest, at twenty-seven. Other notable actresses span their early twenties: Ann Rutherford (1940) at twenty-three, Natalie Oglé (1980) at twenty-two. By casting adult actresses, these performances create a kind of schism in the audience's reception of the character: it becomes easy to see Lydia as a young woman acting rashly and suffering the social consequences of her own thoughtlessness, and harder to see her as the very young victim of what we might now call sexual grooming. Wickham, more damningly, visually appears to be only a cad who seduces a near-equal in age. If Lydia were played by a fifteen-year-old actress, could the audience sit as comfortably with her seduction and marriage? Would they continue to hate her with such relish? Given the lack of alternative evidence, these questions must remain speculative.

Lydia's affair is difficult to align with contemporary Western attitudes toward sex, for it pits the recognition of predatory behavior against the impulse to restrict and punish teenage sexual experimentation. In their overview of the different strategies screenwriters employ when modernizing Lydia, Carol M. Dole and Courtney DuChene note that "a premarital sexual relationship would be considered normal for most young women in the West in the twenty-first century," making Lydia's storyline one of the "knottiest problems" for adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* set in the present day. But as the tragedy of Amanda Todd demonstrates, the prevalence of premarital sex does not mean it is free from social repercussions or other dangers, and teenaged girls often receive the brunt of them. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* skirted this problem by aging the character up, placing both the actress and character in her early twenties. This allowed them to maintain Lydia's youthfulness and position her at a threshold of age and immaturity legible to their audience. By swapping the fact of seduction

for the publication of a sex tape, the creators of the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* kept Wickham's sexual and emotional manipulations at the forefront of the viewers' minds. Increasing Lydia's age also gave the creators more flexibility to explore the complicated terrain of feminine sexuality, with sympathetic attention to the missteps and regrets that often trouble young people's early experiences of sexual intimacy. In doing so, they circumvented the portrayal of what would now legally be classified as statutory rape, and homed in upon the elements of Lydia's story that are "unpleasant and uncomfortable to watch" (Luetkenhaus 73). This change maintained consistency with the novel by creating a problem that Darcy's money can help to solve, leaving Lydia free to reconnect with her sisters and recover her sense of trust without fear of the recording continuing to haunt her future. In this sense, Lydia of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* hewed closely to *Pride and Prejudice* by offering Lydia a bittersweet resolution that allows her at least some degree of continued happiness.

Lydia's story may have been a secondary plot designed to distinguish the tale's heroine, but the format of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* gave Lydia a voice that almost all previous media adaptations were unable or unwilling to provide, and for the first time, sympathies were squarely in Lydia's court. As one viewer wrote:

I identify so deeply with Lydia in this series. Being the youngest sister, being the most flirtatious one, dating the most guys, making the most mistakes. And I dated a guy like George Wickham. A guy who isolated me from my friends and family, who made me feel like I didn't love him unless I did exactly what he asked. I was lucky enough to have gone to a seminar about "revenge porn" before meeting him, so when he asked me to send him topless pictures, I refused. But I don't doubt that when we broke up.... he would've sent those pictures around. (Nina Richner)

Like the loving eulogies still generated by Amanda Todd's final words, Lydia's narrative has its own afterlife. In *The Epic Adventures of Lydia Bennet*, a short print spinoff by the show's writers that eventually gives Lydia a happy ending, the writers acknowledge how this work would never have happened without the outpouring of concern from their audience: "*The Epic Adventures of Lydia Bennet* is the direct result of people caring about a secondary character so much, she needed the chance to tell her own story. Thus, everyone who tweeted, Tumblr-posted, or said anything about how much Lydia's story meant to them is the reason this book exists."



But this outpouring of concern, read differently, places this new Lydia's eventual happy ending in a new light: would the audience's protective instincts have manifested so strongly absent her misery? In one of the more striking departures from the original story, the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* gave their Lydia the mournful self-reflections that the original Bennets had so wished to see. Lydia of the web series is emotionally damaged by Wickham's treatment of her, and her tearful reunion with Lizzie and Jane is deeply affecting. All three sisters reckon with their prior opinions and choices and reflect upon how they might build stronger bonds between them. Lydia's great sadness generated intense feelings in many fans of the show, the comments welling up with descriptions of the unexpected sobbing and laughter. Lydia's despair only further confirmed the audience's love for her. But many were indignant that Lydia was brought to such an emotional extreme in the first place. Upon witnessing her anguish, viewers immediately wished to undo it. As one wrote,

This is sad, and also completely wrong. Lydia in the book was HAPPY. She was happy she left with Wickham, Happy they lived in London, happy they got married. She loved catching a husband. She loved rubbing it in her sister's faces. She never ever ever thought she ruined herself or her family. This departure from the source material is disgraceful. Sure it was a fantastic web series, and was engaging, and deserved the Emmy it won, but still. THIS IS WRONG. Lydia was NEVER unhappy. She was a thoughtless, senseless, silly HAPPY girl. (Berighteous)

As Heidi S. Bond notes, "If Lydia had ever come to understand the degree to which she had been preyed upon, there would have been no happy ending" (1076). While Bond sees Lydia's marriage as only a kind of sleight of hand that conceals the harms done to her, Austen's ending also carefully insulates Lydia from the guilt and shame that properly belongs to her husband.

And indeed, the original Lydia sailed through her seduction and near-ruination with aplomb, unflaggingly buoyed up by her smugness and innate joy. To Elizabeth's distress, Lydia and Wickham "seemed each of them to have the happiest memories in the world. Nothing of the past was recollected with pain" (Austen 219). Readers of the novel tend to agree with Lizzy's assessments, accompanying her through the burn of secondhand embarrassment so extreme she needed to flee the room. Lizzy wishes to find in Lydia some kind of moral core or glimmer of introspection, and such a desire is sensible. But for a modern audience, the locus point upon which Lizzy's desired introspection rests raises an uncomfortable question: what does it mean to wish that a person feel embarrassment or pain for consensual sex? What comes from wanting a person to

recontextualize their sexual history as something traumatic, painful, and regrettable? This is not to say that every sexual encounter should be celebrated, but to recognize that there is a coldness to wishing that a sixteen-year-old feel pain and regret, especially after she is already married and legally entangled with her seducer. Must our sympathies be predicated upon Lydia's agony? Or can the fierce desire to protect this new 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of Lydia from pain be transferred back to the self-centered, annoying, and brash child of the original story, despite her lack of remorse? Read with such questions in mind, Austen's descriptions of Lydia at times carry an unexpected ring of triumph. She will never suffer, and her personality will never dampen: "Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless" (Austen 219). Such a sentence might condemn her to a lifetime of social gaffes and blunders, but assures that she will never feel the sting of them. Lydia's tragic arc in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* perhaps unintentionally encourages present-day readers to find solace in her original ending: after two-hundred years, we at last have a case for the continued, unbroken happiness of Lydia Bennet.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations throughout retain their original emphasis, capitalization, punctuation, and use of emoticons or other emotive typography.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> The >.< emoji is popularly used to indicate wincing in embarrassment or pain.

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