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JOHN SUTHERLAND

*Who Betrays  
Elizabeth Bennet?*

*Further Puzzles in  
Classic Fiction*



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are told, 'related the whole story which the reader knows already, varying the truth only in some circumstances, and totally concealing the money she had received'. Among those 'varied circumstances', we may suppose, is the true account of what she happened to be doing out of bed (or between beds) at that ungodly hour.

The Oxford World's Classics *Tom Jones* is edited by John Bender and Simon Stern, with an introduction by John Bender.

Jane Austen · *Pride and Prejudice*

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*Who betrays Elizabeth Bennet?*

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Elizabeth Bennet's final put-down of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Volume III, Chapter 14 of *Pride and Prejudice* ranks with Lady Bracknell and the handbag as one of the most memorable scenes in literature. As Jane Austen tells it, it is a conflict of battleaxe versus rapier with the old battleaxe comprehensively vanquished. Lady Catherine flies the field with her magnificently hollow rebuke: 'I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet. I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased' (p. 318).

What has so seriously displeased Lady Catherine is the report that Elizabeth is about to become engaged to Darcy—a marital prize she has reserved for her own daughter Anne. The couple are 'tacitly' engaged—she loftily tells Miss Bennet. But, as she is obliged to add: 'The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind' (p. 315). The de Bourghs have not troubled, that is, to secure the young man's compliance in the matter.

Elizabeth holds her ground, parrying all the older woman's attempts to coerce her into an 'undertaking'—a surrender, that is, of any claim to Darcy. By sheer dialectical skill, Elizabeth neither admits any intention of marrying the gentleman nor offers any guarantee that she will not. Her sub-zero *politesse* drives de Bourgh to paroxysms of fury and what even she, imperceptive as she is, dimly perceives to be foolishness: 'Obstinate, headstrong girl! I am ashamed of you! Is this your gratitude to me for my attentions to you last spring?

Is nothing due to me on that score?' (p. 316). After her antagonist bustles away in a rage, Elizabeth wonders:

from what the report of their engagement could originate, Elizabeth was at a loss to imagine; till she recollected that *his* [Darcy's] being the intimate friend of Bingley, and *her* [Elizabeth's] being the sister of Jane, was enough, at a time when the expectation of one wedding, made every body eager for another, to supply the idea. (p. 319)

It's a weak supposition—unworthy of the sharp-witted Miss Bennet. And it is exploded immediately by her father. He has received a perplexing letter from Mr Collins: 'He begins with congratulations on the approaching nuptials of my eldest daughter [Jane and Bingley], of which it seems he has been told, by some of the good-natured, gossiping Lucases' (p. 321). Jane Austen laid this train of gossip at the end of Volume III, Chapter 13, when Mrs Bennet goes to her sister, the lawyer's wife, and 'was privileged to whisper it to Mrs Philips, and *she* ventured, without any permission, to do the same by all her neighbours in Meryton' (p. 311). Among whom, we deduce, are the Philips family's close neighbours at Lucas Lodge. As we follow the line of clues, Lady Lucas has written to her daughter Charlotte, now Mrs Collins, and she has passed the news of Jane and Bingley's engagement on to her husband and his patroness over dinner at Rosings.

All this is transparent enough, and fits in with the gossipy world of Longbourn and Meryton (separated, as we are told, by only a mile's 'short walk', p. 14). But Mr Collins's letter contains something else. He goes on to felicitate Mr Bennet on the impending marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to 'one of the illustrious personages in the land' (p. 321). Who can this 'illustrious personage' be, Mr Bennet wonders? It must be Darcy. But, to a commonsensical man like him, it *cannot* be 'Mr Darcy,

who never looks at any woman but to see a blemish, and who probably never looked at *you* in his life! It is admirable' (p. 322). And preposterous. The effect of this double-fronted attack is—of course—to put any possible union between Mr Pride and Miss Prejudice entirely out of the question. Wheels are being spoked (particularly if, as we suspect, similar rumours are being cast to embarrass Darcy).

There is a puzzle underlying this interesting tangle, pointed out to me by Kathleen Glancy:

*How* could there be a report in Meryton about *anyone*, much less one of Mrs Bennet's daughters, getting married, which has *not* reached the ears of Mrs Bennet herself? It can't have done or her attitude to Darcy would have undergone its dramatic metamorphosis far sooner than it does. Her sister Mrs Philips can't have heard it either, for she would have passed it on to Mrs Bennet at once. It is all the more amazing because it is known to Sir William and Lady Lucas.

Does such a report exist? Is Mr Collins, for heaven knows what reason, *lying* when he informs Lady Catherine in conversation and Mr Bennet by letter about Elizabeth's impending marriage to one of the most illustrious persons in the land? Or, even more horrible, has Jane Austen blundered. Can the puzzle be made sense of, Miss Glancy asks?

It is indeed puzzling. The Philips' house, Lucas Lodge, and Longbourn are all at a convenient walking distance from each other, and gossip flashes between them as fast as ladies can move between the establishments on their daily round of 'calls'. Why then are Mr and Mrs Bennet in the dark, and Mr Collins and Lady Catherine—the two most obtuse and imperceptive characters in the novel—all-knowing on this confidential matter? Mrs Bennet, of course, is obtuse and imperceptive on all subjects save one—her daughters' marriage prospects. If there were so

much as a whisper about the possibility of a match for Elizabeth with Darcy, she would have been on fire with the intelligence.

There is, I think, a plausible explanation to Miss Glancy's puzzle. The most interesting character in the novel, who Jane Austen clearly does not have room to develop fully, is Charlotte Collins (née Lucas). Formerly Elizabeth Bennet's particular friend, Charlotte delivers her opinions with impressive authority. Early in Chapter 6, on the subject of the relation of the sexes, Charlotte utters what I think is the longest speech (the irrepressible Miss Bates excepted) of any woman in all the six novels. Laden with Johnsonian epigram ('if a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him; and it will then be but poor consolation to believe the world equally in the dark', p. 17) it eloquently expresses Charlotte's pragmatic philosophy of sex:

'There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself. We can all *begin* freely—a slight preference is natural enough; but there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew *more* affection than she feels.' (p. 17)

Charlotte evidently believes that women are so socially disadvantaged that they must strike, like bandits, when opportunity offers—and if necessary dissimulate to get their prize. This is theory. It is put in practice when Charlotte takes Mr Collins on the rebound, only hours after Elizabeth has rejected his proposal of marriage. No woman with a scintilla of 'pride' would do such a thing. A 27-year-old woman driven by cold reason might—if the calculation were to her advantage. Such a woman would weather out the scorn of being thought second-best. Words will never hurt her. Charlotte's acceptance of Mr Collins

leads to a painful rupture between the former friends. Elizabeth is surprised by the intelligence into a wounding tactlessness:

'Engaged to Mr. Collins! my dear Charlotte,—impossible!'

The steady countenance which Miss Lucas had commanded in telling her story, gave way to a momentary confusion here on receiving so direct a reproach; though, as it was no more than she expected, she soon regained her composure, and calmly replied,

'Why should you be surprised, my dear Eliza?—Do you think it incredible that Mr. Collins should be able to procure any woman's good opinion, because he was not so happy as to succeed with you?' (p. 113)

Charlotte was quick to perceive subliminal attraction between Elizabeth and Darcy: 'I daresay you will find him very agreeable' (p. 81) she tells her friend, as early as Chapter 18. Over the years Charlotte has had to put up with many slights from the Bennets. In Chapter 5 Mrs Bennet, recalling the glories of the ball, complacently tells her:

'You began the evening well, Charlotte,' said Mrs. Bennet with civil self-command to Miss Lucas. 'You were Mr. Bingley's first choice.'

'Yes;—but he seemed to like his second better.'

'Oh!—you mean Jane, I suppose—because he danced with her twice. To be sure that *did* seem as if he admired her—indeed I rather believe he *did* . . . ' (pp. 14–15)

Women as clever as Miss Lucas do not forget these things.

Charlotte is off-stage for the second half of the novel—disposed of in the great marriage auction. But simply because she is not seen, we should not imagine that she is getting less clever or less sharp. Having to dine every evening with the Revd Mr William Collins and the Rt. Hon. Lady Catherine de Bourgh would turn a saint's milk of human kindness to vinegar. What we may assume is that

an embittered Charlotte is determined to settle accounts with Elizabeth. She will poison Elizabeth's prospects, with a pre-emptive strike that she knows will provoke an outburst of the young woman's incorrigible 'prejudice'. It is a stroke of well-conceived malice. It fails—but only just.<sup>1</sup>

The Oxford World's Classics *Pride and Prejudice* is edited by James Kinsley and Frank W. Bradbrook, with an introduction by Isobel Armstrong.

Jane Austen · *Mansfield Park*

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*What do we know about Frances Price  
(the first)?*

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In a short note in the Jane Austen Society *Report* for 1982 Deirdre Le Faye points out a problem in the sketched background to *Mansfield Park*. It relates to the three Ward sisters, each of whom plays a significant, if supporting, role in the novel's plot.<sup>1</sup> The problem is laid out in Jane Austen's typically crisp *mise en scène* in the first two pages of the narrative. 'About thirty years ago,' the novel opens, 'Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton' (p. 1).

Given its date of publication, 1814, the 'thirty years ago' reference would set Maria's happy catch in the 'season' of 1784 or thereabouts. Huntingdon and Northampton are neighbouring counties and the same social set attends the same events. We get a momentary glimpse of the family behind the bride, but no more than a glimpse: 'All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.'

The lawyer uncle and the dowry (albeit three thousand short) indicate professional respectability and a middle rather than upper station in life (the younger sons of the nobility go into the church or the army, not the law; noble wives bring with them property, not money). We know absolutely nothing of the Ward parents. But

discusses the issue in the introduction to his Oxford World's Classics edition of Defoe's novel *Roxana* (Oxford, 1996), 341–2.

### *Tom Jones*

1. Coleridge's reported ejaculation (in conversation) was: 'What a master of composition Fielding was! Upon my word, I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned' (quoted in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 269).

### *Pride and Prejudice*

1. Kathleen Glancy was kind enough to read this chapter in proof. 'Your explanation is most ingenious', she concedes. But Miss Glancy is 'not wholly convinced. Charlotte may very well have scores to settle with some members of the Bennet family . . . Elizabeth, though, was the person whose friendship Charlotte valued most in the world and except for one unguarded reaction to the news of Charlotte's engagement—and Charlotte was *expecting* that—says and does nothing unkind to her. Would one careless remark be enough to rankle to the extent of making Charlotte want to ruin Elizabeth's chances of making a brilliant match?' Miss Glancy is not, as she says, 'wholly convinced'. On the other hand she sportingly offers a conjecture that 'might add weight to your theory. Mr Collins's letter to Mr Bennet, after his warning against Elizabeth's supposed engagement, goes on about his dear Charlotte's situation and expectation of an olive branch. Pregnancy can lead to mood swings and irrational behaviour, and it is easy to imagine that the thought of Lady Catherine dispensing advice on prenatal care and the rearing of the child and the awful possibility that it would resemble its father might prey on Charlotte's mind and cause her subconsciously to blame Elizabeth for her predicament. After all, if Elizabeth had accepted Mr Collins Charlotte wouldn't be pregnant by him.'

### *Mansfield Park*

1. Deirdre Le Faye, 'What was the History of Fanny Price's Mother?', *Jane Austen Society Report* for 1982 (pp. 213–15 of the *Collected Reports*, Vol. III, 1976–85).
2. For the vexed question of the date of the action of *Mansfield Park* see J. Sutherland, *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (London, 1996), 1–9.

3. Miss Le Faye makes enlightening comments on this chapter which she was kind enough to read in proof. On Mrs Norris's first name, Miss Le Faye notes: 'I think it was Dr [R. W.] Chapman who pointed out that as Mrs Norris is godmother to nasty little Betsy Price, it is probable that Mrs N.'s Christian name was Elizabeth'. This is neat and plausible. On the question of the sisters' 'portions' Miss Le Faye suggests that 'Miss Maria Ward may have had a separate fortune, from a godmother or grandmother perhaps. Or possibly the three sisters did each have £7,000—but Miss Ward was already too venomous and scared suitors off, perhaps? Maybe Miss Frances lost hers by making an unsuitable marriage?' On the runaway Bertram daughters, Miss Le Faye notes discriminately that 'in fact, both Maria and Julia Bertram elope—but Julia's is more literally the elopement, as she and Yates flee together to get married at Gretna Green, which was the classic form of elopement. Maria more correctly speaking *runs away* with Henry Crawford, knowing full well that marriage would not be possible for several years at least, while the ecclesiastical and civil divorce proceedings trundled on their ways.' Miss Le Faye picks up, as I did not, that Lieutenant Price is 'disabled for active service' (p. 3). But, as she points out, 'we don't see or hear of the loss of a limb; and he certainly does not seem to suffer from tuberculosis or cancer; and is certainly capable of continuing to beget children. Does he have a bad rupture, perhaps? Or possibly some form of arthritis or rheumatism which might stiffen his arms and legs and so make it impossible to climb ladders, etc., aboard a ship? or to hold a gun to fire volleys? Bearing in mind that Nelson was perfectly able to continue an active career with only one arm and one eye, what can be wrong with Lieut. P. that he too can't serve actively?' All I can suggest is that 'disabled' here means not that Lieutenant Price is physically impaired, but that with the lull in the war there is no active service for him to perform; 'disabled' means 'unable'. I am aware this is a feeble retort to Miss Le Faye's witty conjectures. She reserves her most vigorous protest for my suggestion that Lieutenant Price is an abusive parent. 'He *comes home* to drink his rum and water—*doesn't* stay out boozing with the boys till all hours. And at home, he sits down *and reads the newspaper*—perfectly domesticated! Makes no complaint about his wife's incompetent housekeeping—*doesn't* go out with the town tarts but begets an honest and healthy and