



## George and Georgiana: Symmetries and Antitheses in *Pride and Prejudice*

MARGIE BURNS

Dr. Margie Burns is a freelance journalist and lectures in English at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

**E**VEN AFTER MULTIPLE RE-READINGS OF *Pride and Prejudice*, the character of George Wickham repays close detection. He does not “unfold”—even multiple re-readings do not deepen him into a character for the reader to relate to—but close pursuit of this snakiest of snakes through the narrative timeline discovers an awesome amount of leftover material in him. Flaubert or Tolstoy or even Thackeray would have indulged fuller development to a character anything like Wickham, and actor Hugh Grant extends himself in the more superficial role of rival to Darcy in the two *Bridget Jones* films. Austen, in contrast, sketches Wickham rather thinly, more by inference than through direct dialogue and action, and ultimately passes him along to Lydia Bennet like a bolt of leftover fabric.

Nonetheless, Wickham is key to development, in more than one sense, in the novel. *Pride and Prejudice* is partly a detective story of emotional development, like *Emma*—which Sinclair Lewis called one of the five greatest detective novels ever written—and any work of detection depends on timeline.

First, without being presented as a conscious observer like Elizabeth, Wickham is present when Darcy and Elizabeth re-encounter on the street, with others, after their visit of several days in Netherfield Hall. The narrative focus in the scene is entirely on Elizabeth’s observation of the mysterious exchange between Wickham and Darcy:

Mr. Darcy . . . was beginning to determine not to fix his eyes on Elizabeth, when they were suddenly arrested by the sight of the stranger, and Elizabeth happening to see the countenance of both as they looked at each other, was all astonishment at the effect of the meeting. Both changed colour, one looked white, the other red. Mr. Wickham, after a few moments, touched his hat—a salutation which Mr. Darcy just deigned to return. What could be the meaning of it?—It was impossible to imagine; it was impossible not to long to know. (72-73)

The focus on Elizabeth's observation, and curiosity, is so powerful here that it makes the observation seem one-directional. But Wickham, motivated by envy, has obviously been an astute and close observer of Darcy—handsome, clever, and rich—throughout their formative years. He knows Darcy well, probably better than Bingley does. He must be preternaturally alert to any emotional exchange involving Darcy and well able to perceive Darcy's interest in Elizabeth, better than Elizabeth does. Against the backstory, the benevolence and affection of Darcy's late father toward Wickham, the novel repeatedly suggests that Wickham knows how to provoke Darcy.

From the moment Wickham joins the regiment at Meryton, furthermore, he is well positioned to catch up on local gossip. If handsome young men, as well as plain, must have something to live on, they must have fodder for gossip, and Wickham is an adventurer alertly looking for a rich wife. Wickham's acquaintance with the Bennet family is furthered in this first meeting, when Denny and Wickham walk the young ladies to their uncle Philips's house. Wickham shares his enmity with Darcy with the regiment, as Denny confirms in explaining Wickham's absence from the Netherfield ball: "I do not imagine his business would have called him away just now, if he had not wished to avoid a certain gentleman here" (89). Thus, while the narrative does not explicate these connections, Wickham would undoubtedly hear about Darcy's dancing with Elizabeth, et cetera, and when he encounters Darcy on the street, he hears that Elizabeth and Jane have visited at Netherfield for several days. As Captain Tilney has known of Isabella's engagement almost as long as he has known her, Wickham knows, from the moment of his being introduced to Elizabeth, that Darcy takes an interest in her.

Second, it is *Wickham* who tells Elizabeth, just after she has stayed four days in the same house with Darcy, that Darcy will marry Miss de Bourgh:

Mr. Wickham's attention was caught; and after observing Mr. Collins for a few moments, he asked Elizabeth in a low voice

whether her relation were very intimately acquainted with the family of de Bourgh.

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” she replied, “has very lately given him a living. I hardly know how Mr. Collins was first introduced to her notice, but he certainly has not known her long.”

“You know of course that Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Lady Anne Darcy were sisters; consequently that she is aunt to the present Mr. Darcy.”

“No, indeed, I did not.—I knew nothing at all of Lady Catherine’s connections. I never heard of her existence till the day before yesterday.”

“Her daughter, Miss de Bourgh, will have a very large fortune, and it is believed that she and her cousin will unite the two estates.” (83)

Again the narrative thrust is directed toward Elizabeth’s reaction and away from Wickham as her source: “This information made Elizabeth smile, as she thought of poor Miss Bingley. Vain indeed must be all her attentions, vain and useless her affection for his sister and her praise of himself, if he were already self-destined to another.” That Wickham conveys this gossip about Darcy and Miss de Bourgh, which proves false, is overshadowed.

It is also overshadowed by Wickham’s detailed and cleverly paced effort to damage Darcy (77-84)—just when Elizabeth is becoming more acquainted with Darcy:

[W]hat she chiefly wished to hear she could not hope to be told, the history of his acquaintance with Mr. Darcy. She dared not even mention that gentleman. Her curiosity however was unexpectedly relieved. Mr. Wickham began the subject himself. He . . . asked in an hesitating manner how long Mr. Darcy had been staying there.

“About a month,” said Elizabeth; and then, unwilling to let the subject drop, added, “He is a man of very large property in Derbyshire, I understand.”

“Yes,” replied Wickham;—“his estate there is a noble one. A clear ten thousand per annum. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself—for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy.”

Elizabeth could not but look surprised.

“You may well be surprised, Miss Bennet, at such an asser-

tion, after seeing, as you probably might, the very cold manner of our meeting yesterday.—Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?” (77)

Wickham follows up systematically. Just before she departs to visit Charlotte Lucas Collins, in other words shortly before she will become reacquainted with Darcy, Wickham prejudices Elizabeth further beforehand, inoculating her against accurate and verifiable information:

The farewell between herself and Mr. Wickham was perfectly friendly; on his side even more. . . . [A]nd in his manner of bidding her adieu, wishing her every enjoyment, reminding her of what she was to expect in Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and trusting their opinion of her—their opinion of every body—would always coincide, there was a solicitude, an interest which she felt must ever attach her to him with a most sincere regard. (151–52)

Indeed, Wickham hardly seems to need subtlety through two-thirds of the book, because the Bennet sisters are not on their guard against him. Even Mr. Bennet is partial to him. Their radar is down, mainly because of the seeming hauteur of Darcy and the dishonesty and snobbery of the unpleasant Bingley sisters.

After Elizabeth returns home from the lengthy visit at Rosings during which Darcy proposes to her, however, Wickham again (after Mary King escapes) attempts to follow up:

Elizabeth was now to see Mr. Wickham for the last time. . . . On the very last day of the regiment’s remaining in Meryton, he dined with others of the officers at Longbourn; and so little was Elizabeth disposed to part from him in good humour, that on his making some enquiry as to the manner in which her time had passed at Hunsford, she mentioned Colonel Fitzwilliam’s and Mr. Darcy’s having both spent three weeks at Rosings, and asked him if he were acquainted with the former.

He looked surprised, displeased, alarmed; but with a moment’s recollection and a returning smile, replied, that he had formerly seen him often; and after observing that he was a very gentlemanlike man, asked her how she had liked him. Her answer was warmly in his favour. With an air of indifference he soon afterwards added, “How long did you say that he was at Rosings?” (233)

When Elizabeth explains that she now understands Darcy better, Wickham pushes farther, this time failing ludicrously with his red herring of Miss de Bourgh:

“You, who so well know my feelings towards Mr. Darcy, will readily comprehend how sincerely I must rejoice that he is wise enough to assume even the *appearance* of what is right . . . I only fear that the sort of cautiousness, to which you, I imagine, have been alluding, is merely adopted on his visits to his aunt, of whose good opinion and judgment he stands much in awe. His fear of her, has always operated, I know, when they were together; and a good deal is to be imputed to his wish of forwarding the match with Miss De Bourgh, which I am certain he has very much at heart.”  
(234-35)

While it shows Wickham’s continuing efforts to keep Darcy from Elizabeth, with great narrative economy this conversation also gives Wickham a motive to elope with Lydia. From this point on, the novel has the potential to become a smutfest, entirely because of Wickham. It takes all the narrative distance, in more than one sense, that Austen can master to keep her seducer from becoming the narrative sinkhole he would have been for any European novelist. The plot thickens. Displeased with Elizabeth, Wickham soon attempts revenge on her through her sister, as he previously attempted revenge on Darcy by planning an elopement with Darcy’s sister. Ironically, he thus provides Elizabeth and Darcy an additional bond. Elizabeth is unable to see this motivation in Wickham, partly because of its perversity and partly because of her understandable preoccupation with Lydia.

So is Wickham’s pursuit of Elizabeth partly motivated by his desire for revenge against Darcy? This possibility is not explicitly stated. Elizabeth does not see it, and logically she cannot, because she does not perceive early the extent of Darcy’s interest in her. Even when Darcy proposes, Elizabeth stares, and doubts; she remains in suspense about Darcy’s feelings, more than Wickham does—partly because she does not want to be too much like her mother. But even Mrs. Bennet does not see the Darcy proposal coming.

The other hypothesis is that Jane Austen constructs this plot without herself being fully aware of its possibilities. This proposition, however, is rebutted by extensive if subtle parallels between the Georgiana elopement and the Lydia elopement. Notwithstanding appearances, the symmetries linking Lydia Bennet and Georgiana Darcy are numerous. Both girls are what we could call “set up.” Like Lydia at Brighton, Georgiana Darcy at Ramsgate was out on her own too young, with no mother to guard her. Lydia is excessively exposed to Wickham’s charm by the enthusiasm of her entire family and town, Georgiana by predisposing circumstances in the august Darcy family.

Austen’s adeptness at naming characters plays a part here. Since

George Wickham was godson to Darcy's father, the elder Darcy's first name was presumably George. His wife was Anne. Their daughter is Georgiana. Mr. Wickham and Miss Darcy, therefore, are George and Georgiana. No wonder Georgiana, lonely, shy and repressed, is persuaded to fancy herself in love, perhaps destined from birth for Wickham, her almost adopted brother. Wickham undoubtedly found it easy to pair their names, making the threadbare seem interesting and irresistible; besides, Georgiana has the situation of her cousin Anne, named after Georgiana's mother and said to be destined from birth for her brother, for a plausible-seeming parallel.

These balanced antitheses and symmetrical parallels are neoclassicism, not accident. *Pride and Prejudice* revels in them. Even Lady Catherine de Bourgh's bland, sickly, and stupefyingly uninteresting daughter is a subtle part of the picture. So thinly sketched as a character that she is lucky to have a first name, Miss de Bourgh is mainly a shadow of her mother's wishes for her cousin Darcy: when Lady Catherine comments on how sad Darcy seems to leave Rosings, "Mr. Collins had a compliment, and an allusion to throw in here, which were kindly smiled on by the mother and daughter" (210). This, be it noted, is the only time in the book that Miss de Bourgh is said to smile. No wonder she never speaks to Elizabeth, who has had repeated contact with Darcy and whom her mother considers a pretty, genteel kind of girl.

The novel, however, does not focus on Anne de Bourgh's perspective any more than it focuses on Wickham's. When Elizabeth sees Miss de Bourgh from the Collins parsonage, the observation may be two-way—but the narrative does not say so. We are told what Elizabeth thinks of Miss de Bourgh but never what Miss de Bourgh thinks of Elizabeth. The coda at the end mentions that Miss Bingley pays off every arrear of civility to Elizabeth but does not fill in the same information about Miss de Bourgh, even while mentioning that her mother eventually visits Elizabeth and Darcy at Pemberley. A European novel at that point would pack Miss de Bourgh off to Ramsgate, with two men.

The narrative is blank about any interchange between Wickham and Miss de Bourgh, acquainted since childhood. Her station is only as far above his as Georgiana's, but a linkage between George Wickham and Anne de Bourgh receives no suggestion and thus requires no narrative rebuttal. Whether she is too snobbish to think about Wickham, too engrossed with her cousin Darcy, or simply too well protected by a dragon of a mother, her uninterest might motivate Wickham to further pique against the Darcy family—but that also goes unstated.

Austen cuts the Gordian knot of this nest of symmetrical complexities so effectively that, even aside from their shared boyhood, it is not out of bounds for Darcy to end up brother-in-law to Wickham. Every feeling may revolt, but Austen ruthlessly pulls it off. Ironically, Wickham and Mr. Collins, both putative suitors to Elizabeth, end up related, and both end up related to Darcy—mostly through Austen’s preventing George Wickham from becoming the cuckoo in the nest. Success of that sort is reserved to Fanny Price, in Austen’s next novel.

#### WORK CITED

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1965.