



Darcy's Intentions: Solving a Narrative Puzzle in *Pride and Prejudice*

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LADY CATHERINE HAS HEARD that her nephew Fitzwilliam Darcy might be ready to propose to Elizabeth Bennet. How did she learn of this report? Several years ago, I put the question to a fan of Jane Austen so keen that, at the age of eleven, she could tell what was happening *between the chapters*. Her answer was that Darcy dropped a hint to Colonel Fitzwilliam, who then told Lady Catherine. This answer, though “wrong,” is one the journeywoman Miss Austen might have been well advised to entertain, over the account she decided on. In the official account, Lady Catherine says, “A report of a most alarming nature, reached me two days ago. I was told, that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that *you*, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy” (353). From whom did she receive this report? Apparently from Mr. Collins, who says in his letter to Mr. Bennet: “After mentioning the likelihood of this marriage to her ladyship last night, she immediately, with her usual condescension, expressed what she felt on the occasion . . .” (363). (Mr. Collins seems to feel that the mere hint of Lady Catherine’s disapproval will suffice to prevent the marriage.) Lady Catherine has now come to force Elizabeth to deny the report: “At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted” (354). Interestingly, she does not go to Darcy himself for a denial of the report. She must be closer to, she must have more of a claim on, her own nephew, than on the pretty friend of Mrs. Collins who gives her opinion “very decidedly for so young a person”

(166). Is even Lady Catherine somewhat in awe of the grand Mr. Darcy? He has gone off to London for ten days, after giving his blessing to his friend Bingley's engagement to Miss Jane Bennet. Perhaps he has gone off to contemplate his options. But his aunt would surely know of his whereabouts, and the postal service was in full operation.

From whom did Mr. Collins learn of the possibility? Mr. Bennet says that Mr. Collins learned of the approaching nuptials of Jane and Bingley from "some of the good-natured, gossiping Lucases," and as for the report of Darcy's intended engagement to Elizabeth, Mr. Collins says, "we have been advertised by the same authority" (362). Which leaves us with the question of how the Lucases so confidently reported the imminence of this engagement. But at least this account is in line with Elizabeth's own surmise:

from what the report of their engagement could originate, Elizabeth was at a loss to imagine; till she recollected that *his* being the intimate friend of Bingley, and *her* 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. She had not herself forgotten to feel that the marriage of her sister must bring them more frequently together. And her neighbours at Lucas lodge, therefore, (for through their communication with the Collinses, the report she concluded had reached lady Catherine) had only set *that* down, as almost certain and immediate, which *she* had looked forward to as possible, at some future time. (360)

Notably, the text does not give this account as authoritative; it remains Elizabeth's surmise, without convincing John Sutherland, who says, "It's a weak supposition—unworthy of the sharp-witted Miss Bennet" (18).

Now Sir William did encourage Darcy to dance with Elizabeth: "My dear Miss Eliza, why are not you dancing?—Mr. Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner.—You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is before you" (26). Interestingly, Sir William does not urge Darcy to look favorably on his own daughter. He seems to like the prospect of Darcy with Elizabeth; but on that occasion they do not dance. At a later time, when they do dance, Sir William observes to Darcy, "Allow me to say . . . that your fair partner does not disgrace you, and that I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event, my dear Miss Eliza, (glancing at her sister and Bingley,) shall take place. What congratulations will then flow in!" (92) Does Sir William's admiration of these two as a couple make him confident of their engagement?

If so, why does it take him from April to October to pass on his report? Are we to assume that some unreported occurrence in the meantime has led to his certainty on the subject?

Perhaps we should also take into account Charlotte's observations of the couple, for Charlotte has long suspected that Darcy might be in love with Elizabeth. On his first visit to the Parsonage, she says, "I may thank you, Eliza, for this piece of civility. Mr. Darcy would never have come so soon to wait upon me" (170). As he continues to visit, she says, "My dear Eliza he must be in love with you, or he would never have called on us in this familiar way." But when Elizabeth tells of his silences, "it did not seem very likely, even to Charlotte's wishes, to be the case." The two ladies decide the visits occur simply because the two gentlemen, at that time of year, could find nothing better to do. When Colonel Fitzwilliam laughs at Darcy's unaccustomed "stupidity," Charlotte, "as she would have liked to believe this change the effect of love, and the object of that love, her friend Eliza . . . sat herself seriously to work to find it out.—She watched him whenever they were at Rosings, and whenever he came to Hunsford; but without much success" (180–81). Could Charlotte, based on these observations, report to her parents, the Lucases, that she was sure Darcy was ready to propose?

An answer may be hinted at in a popular recent sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*, by P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*. In an account in which Elizabeth talks something like Mary and Darcy something like Adam Dalgleish, if not Mr. Collins, it is hardly to be wondered that we find highly unsympathetic versions of both Elizabeth and Darcy. And Charlotte. Since we are expected to accept Elizabeth and Darcy as among the detecting protagonists of the sordid events ahead, it is difficult to understand why we are treated in advance to such hostile townspersons' views of the principals of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Among many other unauthorized details, in this version "Miss Lizzy had been determined to capture Mr. Darcy from the moment of their first meeting" (James 6). The week that Elizabeth spends at Netherfield during Jane's illness "must have enhanced Elizabeth's hopes of success and she would have made the best of this enforced intimacy." "The next stage," we are told, "in Elizabeth's campaign was her visit, with Sir William Lucas and his daughter Maria, to Mr. and Mrs. Collins at Hunsford Parsonage" (7). Charlotte, according to this account, "kept her mother informed of every detail of her married life." Darcy's visit with his cousin to the Parsonage confirmed to Charlotte "that he was falling in love," and she "wrote that, in her opinion her friend would have taken

either gentleman with alacrity had an offer been made.” Later, Elizabeth visits Pemberley with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, “and if Miss Elizabeth had entertained any doubts about the wisdom of her scheme to secure Mr. Darcy, the first sight of Pemberley had confirmed her determination to fall in love with him at the first convenient moment” (8). This, in the original a pure joke of Elizabeth’s, is here twisted into an ugly motive. We might wonder what justification the text actually provides for any of these hostile interpretations, but, to give Ms. James her due, nothing is more reasonable than the likelihood of Charlotte’s correspondence with her mother. If she should have said that Darcy was definitely ready to propose, then the Lucases would have had a basis for their rumor. But neither Charlotte nor her father has had an opportunity to observe Darcy and Elizabeth together beyond April, to arrive at any certainty.

John Sutherland carried his suspicion of Charlotte much further. His article and his book are both titled *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?*, apparently on the assumption that Lady Catherine learned of the rumor as a betrayal by someone certain that the report would so infuriate Lady Catherine she would then successfully prevent the marriage—and that this person was Charlotte. After considering some of the difficulties I have reviewed above, he concludes “that an embittered Charlotte is determined to settle her 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” (22). We might wonder whence this wholly unjustified characterization of the sweet, sympathetic Charlotte as Jane Austen depicted her, for apart from quotations above in which Charlotte wishes the best for her friend, we also learn that in “her kind schemes for Elizabeth” Charlotte even sometimes plans her marrying Colonel Fitzwilliam, if not Darcy (181). But in Mr. Sutherland’s account, Charlotte simply *makes up* in hostility to Elizabeth what is apparently and surprisingly the truth—that Darcy might soon propose—and her husband passes on what he suspects to be a false account, claiming falsely that he learned of it from his in-laws. This is a story beyond improbable, preposterous.

We might probe the question in another direction and ask how and when Darcy arrived at his intention. Here we encounter another problem, or gap. After his heroic intervention in the elopement of Lydia and Wickham, he arrives at Longbourn with his friend Bingley, who now has definite marital intentions. On the day before Bingley’s actual proposal, Darcy, we learn, “had left him that morning for London, but was to return home in ten days time” (344). Why does Darcy depart from the scene of his friend’s proposal and possibly

his own? While he is away, we have the scene of Lady Catherine's electric performance in the "prettyish kind of a little wilderness" (352). When Lady Catherine leaves, Elizabeth decides that she "must meditate an application to her nephew" and that the arguments she would present him with might seem to contain "much good sense and solid reasoning" (360–61)—that is, talk him out of his intention. Instead, after his ten days absence, Darcy appears with Bingley, soon to tell Elizabeth that his "affections and wishes are unchanged" (366).

So let us say Charlotte is somehow certain that Darcy is in love with Elizabeth, and that Sir William, dimwit that he is, or his wife (perhaps hearing reports from servants of Darcy's visit with Bingley to the Bennets, or perhaps receiving reports from Charlotte) has become convinced Darcy is in love with Elizabeth. There is still a major distance between being in love and being ready to propose. Especially for so proud, so grand, a man as Darcy, who would presume to know his mind, would think it likely he would stoop so low as Elizabeth Bennet? He himself certainly seemed doubtful of it. The horror of Lady Catherine at the prospect of her nephew being ready to offer his hand, his estate, and his ancestry, to a mere "gentleman's daughter" (356)—the terrible distance between them—must be present in greater strength among such simple folk as Charlotte and her parents. Mr. Bennet himself seems awed in the presence of Darcy: "He is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse any thing, which he condescended to ask" (376).

Grand a man as he is, Darcy does not seem aware of his intentions, does not seem bold enough to propose. Lady Catherine calls on Darcy after (but she could not before?) her visit to Elizabeth:

they were indebted for their present good understanding to the efforts of his aunt, who *did* call on him in her return through London, and there relate her journey to Longbourn, its motive, and the substance of her conversation with Elizabeth; dwelling emphatically on every expression of the latter, which, in her ladyship's apprehension, peculiarly denoted her perverseness and assurance, in the belief that such a relation must assist her endeavours to obtain that promise from her nephew, which *she* had refused to give. But, unluckily for her ladyship, its effect had been exactly contrariwise.

"It taught me to hope," said he, "as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before. I knew enough of your disposition to be certain, that, had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine, frankly and openly." (367)

Darcy, then, was not himself confident enough to propose until *after* he learned of the meeting between Elizabeth and his aunt, who had heard from Mr. Collins, who had heard from Sir William something Darcy himself did not yet know. I'm afraid we are to assume that such simple folk as Charlotte and her parents knew the intentions of Darcy before he himself did. The mind of the grand Mr. Darcy, formidable to many, was transparent to them—not the first time in Austen's fiction that simple folk fancy romantic possibilities.

And who are we to complain that a certain legerdemain was needed to bring off one of the greatest scenes in English literature: “I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. *You* may ask questions, which *I* shall not choose to answer” (354). And that's only the beginning. As for myself, having pondered for many years the question of how the report of Darcy's intentions might have got to Sir William and finally to Lady Catherine, I have decided with absolute confidence: a little bird told him.

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