



Characters Characterizing: The Netherfield Chapters

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“**3** OR 4 FAMILIES IN A COUNTRY VILLAGE is the very thing to work on,” Jane Austen famously told her niece Anna, who aspired to be a novelist (9–18 September 1814). Which would be the three or four families in *Pride and Prejudice*? No doubt the Bennets of Longbourn and the Lucases of Lucas Lodge would be two of them: both families with numerous children, some of marriageable age. Next in line, surely, would be the Bingleys, newly arrived as tenants at Netherfield Park, a family consisting of a young bachelor, his two sisters and a brother-in-law, and an intimate and highly eligible friend, Mr. Darcy—all of marriageable age, and most of them, so far, unmarried. (Later in the novel we get to the Collinses at Hunsford, with their aristocratic patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh of nearby Rosings Park, and later still to the Darcy family at Pemberley near Lambton; but these are distinct families outside of the cluster around Meryton.)

Much of the action of *Pride and Prejudice* centers on Longbourn, among the Bennets. But chapters 7 to 12 relocate us to Netherfield Park, new home of the recently independent Mr. Bingley. And the significant action there almost constitutes a separate play-within-a-novel. Let me venture on an adaptation of Austen's formula for a novel: “A single family in a country house, with two or three unexpected visitors, is the very thing for a *play*.” And I want to consider the Netherfield chapters as constituting something like a play-within-a-novel.

There are many features of drama in the episode, particularly the high proportion of dialogue to narrative. The unities of place and time are strictly

observed: a country house and its immediate environs, and a time frame from Tuesday to Sunday, often with the hour specified as well. One can readily imagine a play script, with the scenes defined as in a playbill:

SCENE 1: Wednesday, 10 a.m. The dining hall, Netherfield Park. Mr. Bingley, his sisters, Mr. Hurst, and Mr. Darcy discovered at breakfast.

Enter Elizabeth Bennet, with "eyes . . . brightened by the exercise" and petticoat "six inches deep in mud" (PP 36). General consternation.

Or,

SCENE 5: Friday, noon. The shrubbery, Netherfield Park. Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy walking on a path that converges with another.

MISS BINGLEY: I hope you will give your mother-in-law a few hints . . . as to the advantage of holding her tongue. . . .

Enter, from a converging walk, Elizabeth and Mrs. Hurst.

DARCY: This walk is not wide enough for our party. We had better go into the avenue.

ELIZABETH: No, no; stay where you are.—You are charmingly group'd. . . . The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth.

Exit, running. (52–53)

No wonder Austen's novels convert to screenplays so readily! But this Netherfield episode especially is almost ready-made for production.

At Netherfield we learn much about that space beyond the proscenium arch—much more than we do, for instance, about Longbourn, although so much more of the novel is set there with the Bennets; for the Bingley surroundings and rituals are unfamiliar to Elizabeth, our focalizer, and we register them with her. Here the Bingleys retire to dress for dinner at five and gather for dinner at six-thirty (35). After dinner the ladies retire to visit Jane in her room upstairs, then reassemble to join the gentlemen in the drawing-room, which is the location for much of the action. Here we learn that books and writing materials are to hand, and card-tables, and a piano-forte. And there is space for the ladies to walk and show off their figures "to the greatest advantage" (56). It is all laid out with stage-like clarity.

Who are our *dramatis personae*? Besides Mr. Bingley, proprietor and host, we have his friend Darcy, the male lead, and their love interests, the two unexpected guests, Jane and the female lead, Elizabeth. Jane was invited, but only for an afternoon; Elizabeth wasn't invited at all but must be accommodated, since she is on a mission of mercy to her sick sister. Jane is largely off-stage; on the single occasion when she is present, Bingley devotes his entire attention to her, but we are not privy to their exchange (54). Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia

are temporary visitors, soon gone, but leaving a ghostly presence to be sneered at. Mr. Hurst, who “lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards” (35), is a useful dummy, easily pushed around, and falling asleep when his presence isn’t called for. And the Bingley sisters provide a kind of chorus to the play, chanting their contempt for all things Bennet: mention of an uncle who “lives somewhere near Cheapside” prompts the cry, “That is capital; . . . and they both laughed heartily” (36–37). This cast forms a goodly company, with zigzags of attraction and repulsion that make for an electric atmosphere.

(By the way: How the Bingley sisters must kick themselves for having invited Jane to Netherfield! Why did they do it? one wonders—for they are certainly *not* keen to encourage their brother’s interest in her. We need to remember that they thought the gentlemen would be away for the duration of Jane’s visit; but thanks to Mrs. Bennet’s skillful management of the weather and the Bennet carriage, they are stuck with Jane, and her sister too, for five days! Their professed affection for Jane seems to be prompted by the prestige they gather from having a pretty girl at their beck and call—like Emma with Harriet Smith or Mrs. Elton with Jane Fairfax.)

An analogy from drama that I believe Jane Austen had in mind is with Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*. As has often been noted, play and novel both present a “merry war” (1.1.50) between the lead players; and both feature lively heroines who carry all before them. Shakespeare’s Beatrice, as Don Pedro notes, was “born in a merry hour”: and Beatrice confirms that in that hour “a star danced, and under that I was born” (2.1.20–24). Similarly, Elizabeth deals in “[f]ollies and nonsense,” and admits, “I dearly love a laugh” (57). Even the subplots are parallel: in each case the hero’s friend temporarily jilts the heroine’s cousin or sister, thus providing the cause of strife between the principals. And the dynamic of opposition within attraction is central to both relationships.

What is achieved by this play-like setup of the Netherfield chapters? As Frank Churchill declares, in a different novel, it is only by seeing people “in their own homes, among their own set, . . . that you can form any just judgment” (*E* 372). This is our chance, and Elizabeth’s too, to observe the Bingleys in their own home, and to make our just judgments. And in Elizabeth’s presence, the whole Bingley family dynamic must be adjusted, as she and the other participants (and we readers too) are thrust into closer knowledge of one another.

There are subplots in this intimate drama: Bingley’s growing attachment to Jane and his sisters’ attempt to nip it in the bud; Miss Bingley’s intent pursuit

of Darcy and growing jealousy of Elizabeth, with her campaign to put her and her family down; and, of course, Darcy's developing attraction to Elizabeth. And all this has to be going on during apparently neutral conversation.

"Conversation," in fact, is a notable issue among this group, as for Austen in other contexts. We know that not all oral exchanges qualify as "conversation." Of John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, the narrator tells us, "[A]ll the rest of his conversation, or rather talk, began and ended with himself" (NA 66). This group values conversation highly, although they are not necessarily very good at it. Miss Bingley is trying to impress Darcy when she asserts, "It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day" at a ball. (Her brother responds reasonably, "Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a ball" [55–56]). Elizabeth has the talent of raising mere talk to the status of conversation. The issue of what constitutes "accomplishment" in a woman is no doubt a tried-and-true topic of conversation; and Miss Bingley can readily launch into the necessary qualifications for a lady who aspires to be called "accomplished." Elizabeth upsets the somewhat routine exchange between Darcy and "his faithful assistant" when she declares of the abstract accomplished lady they present, "I never saw such a woman" (39–40).

"Reading" becomes another issue up for discussion. When Elizabeth takes up a book instead of joining the card game, Miss Bingley comments sneeringly, "Miss Eliza Bennet . . . despises cards. She is a great reader, and has no pleasure in any thing else" (37). Elizabeth demurs. But subsequently Darcy adds "extensive reading" to the qualifications for accomplishment (39). Hence, on another evening, Miss Bingley renounces cards in favor of a book. "How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book," she announces; but presently "[s]he then yawned again, [and] threw aside her book" (55). (Poor Miss Bingley! One could almost feel sorry for her, if she weren't so bitchy!)

Elizabeth, though a relative stranger in the midst of a family party, can give a fresh turn to their exchanges. When Bingley tells Mrs. Bennet that if he were to leave Netherfield, "I should probably be off in five minutes," Elizabeth pauses not on the issue of his leaving but on the character trait of his doing it in a hurry. It is a loaded moment.

"That is exactly what I should have supposed of you," said Elizabeth.

"You begin to comprehend me, do you?" cried he, turning towards her. [The "cried" tag always indicates extra emphasis.]

"Oh! yes—I understand you perfectly." (42)

And she proceeds to live up to the role of “a studier of character;” to his great interest. In this role, she takes them all a long step further into intimacy. Everyone likes to talk about themselves. And for this time “conversation” becomes the intriguing exchange that consists in character analysis. Elizabeth becomes the resident psychiatrist at Netherfield, licensed to diagnose and evaluate the mental tendencies of those around her. Miss Bingley’s boring flattery of Darcy—“How can you contrive to write so even?” “[D]o you always write such charming long letters?” (48)—pales beside Elizabeth’s piquant conclusion, “I am perfectly convinced . . . that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (57).

The usual verbal exchange consists of proposition and immediate response, alternating. But Elizabeth introduces the pause and thoughtful analysis that can lead to genuine advancement of a topic. And Darcy proceeds to learn from her. On the evening after she declares, “I understand [Bingley] perfectly,” he reverts to the issue of Bingley’s declaration that he does things in a hurry; and in spite of its appearance of humility, he classifies it as “an indirect boast” (48): a claim to a charming impulsiveness. Bingley protests against “remember[ing] at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning” (49), but the pause for reflection is a good marker of thoughtful conversation. Darcy is challenging Elizabeth in her role as resident psychiatrist. And he and Elizabeth proceed to place Bingley on the analyst’s couch, to evaluate his claim to swiftness of action. Would he really be so promptly gone from Netherfield, once he had decided on the matter? Or would he be easily dissuaded from his decision by a friend? Elizabeth takes up Bingley’s defense:

“To yield readily—easily—to the *persuasion* of a friend is no merit with you” [she challenges Darcy].

“To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either” [he responds]. (50).

Ironically, Elizabeth here takes the opposite side from that she adopts when Bingley *does* yield readily—easily—to the persuasion of his friend Darcy and quits Netherfield for London despite his growing love for Jane. In that context she scorns him for “that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends” (133). These conversations in a country house party have their resonances in the novel at large.

Bingley doesn’t enjoy being on the couch and the subject of debate between his friend and his guest; and he asks the analysts to “defer [their disputes] till I am out of the room” (51). Nor does Darcy escape unscathed from the frank discussion of his character. When Bingley confesses he is sometimes

scared of his “great tall” friend, and finds him an “awful object” when in his own home of a Sunday, Elizabeth perceives Darcy is offended (50–51). Open season on analysis has its dangers; and Elizabeth takes what many would consider unconscionable liberties with this daunting figure. The approach to intimacy has its hazards. Miss Bingley condemns “that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence,” in her rival (52). Elizabeth can sometimes cut to the bone. But we also hear of the “mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner” that saves her from giving serious offence (52).

She doesn’t escape some of the same intimate scrutiny to which she submits others. And on the memorable Friday evening—the penultimate of her stay—she and Darcy go at each other hammer and tongs, no holds barred. I provide running commentary.

The famous scene begins with Miss Bingley’s inviting Elizabeth to walk round the room with her, by way of attracting Darcy’s attention. It works. But when he says they must be walking in order to show their figures “to the best advantage,” she asks Elizabeth, “How shall we punish him for such a speech?”

“Nothing so easy, if you have but the inclination,” said Elizabeth. “We can all plague and punish one another. Teaze him—laugh at him.—Intimate as you are, you must know how it is to be done.”

“But upon my honour, I do *not*. . . . Teaze calmness of temper and presence of mind! No, no—I feel he may defy us there.” (57)

Poor Miss Bingley! She has done it again: trying to butter Darcy up with flattery, when Elizabeth’s “little something, bordering on impertinence,” is so much more stimulating! All her intimacy with Darcy as her brother’s best friend is as nothing compared with the intimacy this unexpected visitor has achieved during her brief stay in his friend’s country house.

We are now in the thick of analysis of these two characters—of themselves as well as each other. Elizabeth light-heartedly maintains her role as “a studier of character,” but one who specializes in “[f]ollies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies,” which she laughs at whenever she can. “But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without,” she asks Darcy. Her tone is light and provocative; but Darcy comes the heavy. “It has been the study of my life,” he claims, “to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule” (57). Oh, *come on*, Darcy! What kind of a priority is that?—to spend your life less in worthwhile enterprises than in *avoiding* being laughed at! (It is cheering to remember that once the two do get together, Elizabeth checks a meditated witticism about Bingley as an invaluable friend for being so easily guided, since “[s]he remembered that [Darcy] had yet to

learn to be laught at, and it was rather too early to begin” [371]. Teaching him to learn to be laughed at is on her schedule, though, as a project for their married life!)

To return to the discussion at Netherfield about Darcy’s resolution to avoid “weaknesses”:

“Such as vanity and pride” [she prompts him].

“Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation.”

Elizabeth turned away to hide a little smile. (57)

She has her own opinion on that matter. And we are reminded of the novel’s title and main themes. Darcy’s pride is up for full inspection. *Is* pride his personal deadly sin, as Elizabeth believes at this stage? It’s a debatable matter. What we are taught is that it is his *behavior*, rather than his character, that is reprehensible. At the Meryton assembly, as Mrs. Bennet testifies, “he walked here, and he walked there, fancying himself so very great!” (13). “Fancying himself so very great” is her interpretation. But his behavior on that occasion makes him *look* as though he considers himself to be above his company. At that loaded exchange at the piano at Rosings, Elizabeth delivers the instruction that Darcy really needs, if only he would listen: he needs to *practice* at gracious behavior, as she needs to practice at the piano (175). Social intercourse is a skill that improves with exercise. But, instead of paying attention, Darcy passes over the matter with the glib snobbery of the amateur toward the professional: “No one admitted to the pleasure of hearing you [play] can think any thing wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers” (176). When it comes to his first proposal, however, Elizabeth definitely *does* find something wanting! And in treating her relatives the Gardiners graciously at Pemberley, Darcy demonstrates that he has now learned that lesson. Eventually Elizabeth can tell her father, “Indeed he has no improper pride,” and mean it (376).

To return to Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s mutual assessments at Netherfield on that important evening: clearly Darcy believes his pride *is* “under good regulation.” The moral defect that he does admit to is a fault of temper: “I cannot forget the follies and vices of others” (58). (“Follies and vices” are of course more serious than the “follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies” that Elizabeth delights in [57]). “My good opinion once lost is lost for ever,” he confesses (58). He is evidently thinking of Wickham, as Elizabeth will later. “Implacable resentment *is* a shade in a character,” she acknowledges; but admits that she “cannot *laugh* at it” (58).

Darcy now proceeds to lay out his own theory of character: “There is,

I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome” (58). This is serious stuff. “[A] man of sense and education” (175), Darcy has pondered these matters, exploring sophisticated theories of character like Aristotle’s “tragic flaw,” and what Hamlet calls the “vicious mole of nature” to which the tragic hero is subject (*Hamlet* 1.4.25). Elizabeth’s choice, however, is to keep the conversation light. “And *your* defect is a propensity to hate every body,” she concludes playfully. He follows her lead towards lightness: “And yours,’ he replied with a smile, ‘is wilfully to misunderstand them” (58). It is a good-humored windup to a conversation that could have become ugly.

How accurate is his diagnosis of Elizabeth’s willful misunderstanding? Answer: *pretty accurate!* In her hour of understanding, after perusing the section on Wickham in Darcy’s long letter of self-justification, she recognizes that she had “courted prepossession and ignorance” in her judgment of both men (208). Sure enough, willful misunderstanding sums it up very well.

The Netherfield episode, in which the main characters are thrust into unexpected intimacy, serves as a kind of concentrated epitome of the whole of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is the novelist’s business to explore and savor the traits of her characters, as well as to invent them. In this novel, and particularly in these Netherfield chapters, Jane Austen chooses to share this business with her characters and, through the characters, with us, her readers.

From the outset of the novel, Mr. Bennet teaches us, as he teaches Elizabeth, to take aesthetic delight in the eccentricities of the people around him. He is a connoisseur of human absurdity. But Mr. Bennet is strictly an observer. Elizabeth ventures into the fray and defines and challenges the characters she investigates. By raising their consciousness of themselves, particularly with a sophisticated participant like Darcy, she helps to change and develop them, while changing and developing herself. And we readers, too, learn not only to observe, but to follow the debate, to savor the advances in diagnosis, to understand the characters more fully as their self-awareness develops. And all this is presented to us, in these concentrated chapters, with much of the force and immediacy that belongs to drama.

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