

Lady Catherine: A Castle Built on Sand?¹

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Lady Catherine de Bourgh appears to unite some of her world's best blessings: wealth, rank, a suitable marriage and a child. She also seems to enjoy that form of happiness that Swift calls "the possession of being well deceived": with a little help from a coterie of sycophants she has created an apparently irrefragible self-image in which she is wise, generous, an authority on everything from women's education to closet shelves, and beloved by all who are capable of appreciating her. Or has she? We wish to present an iconoclastic (pun intended) view of Lady Catherine. We argue here that a fundamental lack of self-esteem lies beneath her façade, that she is plagued by insecurity.

We believe that certain characteristics of her speech patterns offer grounds for such an interpretation. Consider, for example, Lady Catherine's remarks to Elizabeth about governesses, which quickly, of course, turn into remarks about Lady Catherine's usefulness as a governess-supplier:

If I had known your mother, I should have advised her most strenuously to engage one. I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it. It is *wonderful* how many families I have been the means of supplying in that way. I am always glad to get a young person well placed out. Four nieces of Mrs. Jenkinson are *most delightfully* situated through my means; and it was but the other day, that I recommended another young person, who was merely accidentally mentioned to me, and the family are *quite delighted* with her. Mrs. Collins, did I tell you of Lady Metcalfe's calling yesterday to thank me? She finds Miss Pope a *treasure*. "*Lady Catherine,*" said she, "*you have given me a treasure.*"

(165) [emphasis added]²

There is a strange kind of urgency to her bragging to two young women inferior to her in age, rank and wealth. How she cherishes a word of praise, suggesting a high level of personal need. Repeating the word "treasure," she underscores her boasts with Lady Metcalfe's testimony, "Lady Catherine . . . you have given me a treasure." Note also her tendency to use hyperbolic language, "most strenuously," "wonderful," "most delightful," and "quite delighted," building up evidence on the same point. How strongly she needs to be important, and to think herself valued. It is almost as if a real desperation for ego gratification were the driving force behind her illustrations and language.

In the Rosings drawing room scene where Colonel Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth conversed with so much "spirit and flow, as to draw the attention of Lady Catherine herself," we are told Lady Catherine "did not scruple to call out": "What is that you are saying, Fitzwilliam? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Miss Bennet? Let me hear what it is" (173). Again, later on, when Darcy has joined the couple, she "called out to know what they are talking of" (176). The shrill quality of her demands suggests she cannot bear to be excluded from anything. Could not her expressed need to

be a part of the conversation of others be the voice of a lonely child crying, "let me play, look at me, I want to play too," a cry that leaves suspect the façade of the supremely self-confident great lady?

We note also the speech on Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam's departure.

"I assure you, I feel it exceedingly," said Lady Catherine, "I believe nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do. But I am particularly attached to these young men; and know them to be *so much* attached to *me!*—They were *excessively* sorry to go! But so they always are. The dear colonel rallied his spirits tolerably till just at last; but Darcy seemed to feel it *most* acutely, more I think than last year. His attachment to Rosings, certainly increases."

(210) [emphasis added]

In the use of emphatic language in the above passage, "so much," "excessively," "always" and "most acutely," Lady Catherine appears to need to stress the strength of her nephews' affection. The evidence we possess contradicts her view of the young men's reactions. Colonel Fitzwilliam spent "at least an hour" (209) waiting at the rectory for Elizabeth's return, surely a truer indication of where his real interest lay, and we know the real cause of Darcy's depression. Lady Catherine's interpretations are a reflection of her own needs—this time of her need to believe herself loved.³



"Lady Catherine," said she, "you have given me a treasure"

We would like to argue that Lady Catherine feels, on some subconscious level, *unloved* and *unvalued*. What in her history would account for this?

We can suspect the probable nature of her marriage, as we observe the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who suggests the descendants of earls are unable to marry as they please. Thus in one instance he tells Elizabeth, “‘A younger son, you know, must be inured to self-denial and dependence’” (183). In another he declares, “‘Younger sons cannot marry where they like,’” explaining, “‘Our habits of expence make us too dependant, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money’” (183). As we can assume this situation applies to daughters also, it is informative that both of the Earl Fitzwilliam’s daughters we know of—Lady Catherine and Lady Anne—married men whose rank was below them, but who were extremely wealthy. We suspect Lady Catherine’s marriage as an exchange of rank for money, of status for wealth.

Lady Catherine seems never to have created attachments. Her own daughter, who apparently does not even have an average profile in her mother’s presence, is strangely silent, showing no affection or support for a mother who must fight her battles on every front, from marriage to excuses of poor health for being unable to play the pianoforte (173). As we have seen, the affection that Lady Catherine wishes to imagine her nephews feel for her is suspect.

Consider also what we can infer about her probable situation in her noble father’s household before marriage, which may have been that of dealing with cold parents who valued their daughters only in so far as they could contribute to the family’s aggrandizement through marriage. From Lady Catherine’s statement that “*Daughters* are never of so much consequence to a father” [emphasis added] (211), to her admission that she never learned to play the pianoforte (173), we perceive that she was given neither emotional support nor assistance in the cultivation of social graces. Unimportant to a father at a time when a child’s sense of security develops, Lady Catherine may be one of Jane Austen’s female creations who suffered from a lack of self-esteem. Denied love as a child, thrown in to a loveless marriage, and devastated by the need for approval from males in a patriarchal society, she is left with a two-fold problem of needing to believe that she is esteemed and loved, and needing to overuse wealth and authority to accomplish her desire. If we can speculate that what she was in marriage was cared about by neither her parents nor her husband, Sir Lewis de Bourgh, she was left in a position of being totally powerless in the most important decision of her life. Having been used as a powerless pawn, she was tempted to use power in other relationships. As feminists will argue, one who has been deprived of power in heartfelt situations will be tempted to overuse what little power he or she has in other matters. Her sense of self-worth is asserted by the vehicle of giving advice. Ironically, she tends to advise in the very area where her own youth went awry—education, marriage and parenthood—leading us to wonder if her compensation mechanism works in these particular areas because of her specific sense of deficiency.

Lady Catherine's life is one of implied contradictions, of discrepancies between advice and experience, and testimony and actuality. In the same way that she will "always say" that a governess and regular instruction are important to someone else, but grew up with few social graces herself, she will say that "music" is important, but neither she nor her ailing daughter can play the pianoforte (173). Although she speaks of the affection of her nephews, she is insecure when left out of their conversations, and inaccurate in her judgement of the reason for their emotions. Proud of attempts to arrange a marriage for her daughter, she still shows no evidence of having received fulfilment from a family circle herself. In fact her delusions are in some respects analogous to the "management fantasy" of Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*, showing "nothing more than a means of pandering to her managerial propensities and love of importance."⁴ Like Mrs. Norris, Lady Catherine is weak and wanting in emotional stability. Lady Catherine is truly "a castle built on sand," as her authority is without the foundation of experience.

NOTES

- ¹ We wish to thank Professor Emeritus Kenneth L. Moler for his assistance in the preparation of this article.
- ² *The Novels of Jane Austen*, Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1932. All page references are to this edition.
- ³ Does this entitle us to question the degree of credibility of her "governess" speech? How "delightful" did Mrs. Jenkinson's four nieces find their "situations"? Did Lady Metcalfe call solely for the purpose of thanking Lady Catherine, or thank her in the course of an ordinary morning call?
- ⁴ (145) Refer to Kenneth L. Moler's citation of Mrs. Norris's "management fantasy" as evidence of her need to be needed in "Only Connect: Emotional Strength and Health in *Mansfield Park*" in *English Studies* 64.2 (1983): 144-52.