



The Devil and Jane Austen: Elizabeth Bennet's Temptations in the Wilderness

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Toward the end of Pride and Prejudice, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, determined to forestall the young woman's apparently impending marriage to her nephew Fitzwilliam Darcy, makes a climactic visit to Elizabeth Bennet. Inadvertently, however, Lady Catherine's intervention actually serves as a catalyst for that most undesirable union: her intrusiveness so visibly offends the young woman that the aunt's report to Darcy of her incredible failure reinspires him to press his previously rejected suit. What takes place between the two women in the "wilderness" reveals Elizabeth to be a true Christian heroine, exemplifying the highest ideals of her faith and her church.

LADY CATHERINE'S WORDS VERY EARLY in her conversation with Elizabeth are both emblematic and prophetic in this context. Confined and evidently frustrated by the Bennet domicile and its mistress, Lady Catherine declares, "Miss Bennet, there seemed to be a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company'" (352). Out of doors, perhaps, her hegemony can be reclaimed and reasserted, her imperium reestablished. But such is not to be: Elizabeth is consistently independent and strong-

willed wherever she is. However, there is a sense in which this “wilderness” setting may in fact be absolutely appropriate if not determinative. Jane Austen, the daughter and sister of clergymen and herself well-versed in Scripture, was well aware of her choices of representation and its vehicles. As Irene Collins notes, “Jane Austen was a deeply religious woman. It is unlikely that she ever thought of the morality which she advocated in her novels as anything other than an essential part of Christianity” (182). The source of Elizabeth’s independence, in fact, may reside in the very notion of a Biblical “wilderness” experience.

Austen’s use of the word “wilderness” conforms to the way the word would have been used in its horticultural sense in the 1790s, when the book was first drafted, or at least during the early decades of the next century, when it was first published. In contrast to the stringent, linear models of eighteenth-century landscaping undertaken by Repton and Nash, which illustrate the charming and quiet definition of the picturesque that Burke laid down, Romantic landscapes and English gardens entertain an alternative vision comparable to, if somewhat modulated from, Burke’s unruly, tempestuous sublime.¹ In other words, exuberance, energy, and lack of restraint in virtually Blakean terms can in fact be artificially cultivated. Thus, some English gardens are models of decorum, while others are “wildernesses” where chaos may well be tamed but certainly not ordered out of existence.

In the Bible, Christ retreats to the wilderness after his baptism by John the Baptist and before he begins his ministry. The Evangelists all provide remarkably similar accounts, the most succinct of which is narrated by Mark: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days; tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:12; see also Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13). This verse is from the Revised Standard Version, but the vocabulary of the King James Bible, which Austen would have known, while archaic to our ears, is identical here. Matthew and Luke also specify the temptation litany to which Christ is subject. Nonetheless, if the Baptism anoints and announces Jesus as God’s son, the wilderness setting that directly succeeds the event and precedes the start of his preaching and gathering of disciples

clearly spans and connects the two stages and in some way enables if not impels what follows. Jesus can begin his ministry and enact his mission—in other words, can fulfill the prophecies because his mettle has been tested and his will fired. He has accepted the charge and sustained the challenge.

The importance of the wilderness setting in the confrontation scene between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine shows how landscape in *Pride and Prejudice* becomes a testing ground for the characters. In the wilderness, Elizabeth vigorously and defiantly asserts her independence from Lady Catherine's sphere of power and, indeed, her socially sanctioned and determined realm of authority. "I am only," Elizabeth proclaims triumphantly, "resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me" (358). Not only is she an independent moral agent, but she further claims that "the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn" that Lady Catherine promises would greet the announcement of such nuptials.

Elizabeth Bennet can fulfill her destiny and come to marry Fitzwilliam Darcy because she too has been isolated, tested, and shown to be resolute, deserving, and true. From her receipt of Darcy's letter of explanation in exactly the middle of the book, she is herself suddenly newly aware of her identity: "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (208). From this point onward she progresses toward admiration, trust, gratitude (often the origin of love in Austen's world, as critics have observed), affection, and love for Darcy: "She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in his welfare; and she only wanted to know how she wished that welfare to depend upon herself . . ." (266). All the while, Elizabeth feels set apart, unable to share her conflicting and developing emotions and sensibility with anyone, other than her sister Jane, who is far away from her during nearly all of this interval of the second half of the novel. As Elizabeth explores her feelings and comes to know herself to be in love with and beloved by Darcy, the narrator notes that "she had no reason to fear Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner's curiosity; it was not their wish to force her communication" (264). She is left alone, by choice and

by circumstance. And as she matures and comes into her own, she is increasingly self-reliant and self-contained. She casts off her earlier desire for easy approbation and her unquestioning acceptance of easy social judgments—for instance, that Darcy is haughty and thus contemptible—for the more difficult tasks of self-government and reflective autonomous discernment.

This is not an easy victory for Elizabeth. Along the rocky course of true love this book tracks, she endures shame and disappointment and imagines rejection and loss. As the narrator tells us, “the tumult of her mind was now painfully great” (193). Elizabeth comes to believe that she has revealed her weaknesses before a respected and moral man even as she discovers them, and as she learns, too, that she loves the man she has disdained. When Lydia is thought to have eloped, for example, Elizabeth is with Darcy and interprets his subsequent gloomy silence as follows: “Her power was sinking; every thing *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace . . . never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain” (278). He must be lost to her, but she understands and accepts.

Although she is bound by familial and social obligation and custom, Elizabeth nevertheless acts as an independent moral agent—in short, as a Christian: someone who must strive in life to be like Christ even as human foibles prevent the mortal achievement of that object. Elizabeth knows the distinction between good and evil, and she knows which way the straight and narrow lies, yet the position she occupies is encompassed within and bound by existing ties of mortal commitment, here seen as family and class.

Throughout the novel she is indeed tempted: by Wickham, someone who is less than he appears; by the desire to be entertaining if not a bit wittily provocative in socially sanctioned ways; by her pride and prejudice against the morally upright and wise steward of his provinces that Darcy is revealed to be. All these temptations—what is morally suspect but immediately attractive—cohere in the form of Lady Catherine. She tempts Elizabeth, seeking to intimidate via her ultimately shallow if not empty force, and urging her to adopt an uncomplicated course of action: sim-

ple acquiescence with her obviously superior will.

Lady Catherine has been introduced to the reader earlier as an opinionated, self-important busybody, “a most active magistrate in her own parish,” a tyrant who ministers to the villagers by “settl[ing] their differences, silenc[ing] their complaints, and scold[ing] them into harmony and plenty” (169). Thus, she is shown to be intrusive, maliciously meddling, and perhaps diabolic. Her people dwell in fear of her disapproval and her wrath. Lady Catherine De Bourgh may not be Satan incarnate (although she may be what Mark would call “a wild beast”), but her actions, like those of the self-indulgent and destructive Wickham and, as some critics charge, the lazy and ineffectual Mr. Bennet, align her in this book’s typology with villainy.

Lady Catherine functions, then, as Elizabeth’s tempter. But by the time of their encounter in “a little wilderness,” set apart from the house, the family, and all other customary supports, Elizabeth’s will has already been forged in the smithy of her own agony and suffering. Without knowing whether Darcy will ever propose to her again or not, she nonetheless stands up to Lady Catherine and vanquishes her. Lady Catherine thus becomes essentially irrelevant, just as Satan’s temptations of Christ in the wilderness are a pageant played out for Christians. Elizabeth is shown, thereby, as a true Christian heroine, one whom her author’s clerical family would certainly have venerated and esteemed.²

The wilderness experience in *Pride and Prejudice* therefore serves to underscore and confirm the growth of its protagonist and the rightness of her way. It is a *via media*, informed by reason, worked out in conscience, and redeemed in light.

NOTES

1. Wonnar explores a similar issue in her essay on *Emma*, though she and I diverge in our readings of the implications of landscape.

2. Among recent biographers, Nokes in particular attends to the Anglicanism of Austen’s upbringing. In fact, he cites a letter in which Austen yokes the Christian with the hero in an observation of a contemporary, thereby undergirding my use of terms.

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