

Lady Catherine's Grammar

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"Bad grammar Jane Austen never heard spoken," wrote her great-niece, Fanny Lefroy, in 1883. And she goes on to claim that Jane Austen never committed such grammatical bêtises as split infinitives and the use of "like" for "as."¹ R. W. Chapman likewise testifies to the purity of Jane Austen's grammar, noting that in such matters as the correct use of *shall* and *will* her usage is strict and correct.²

However, though her own grammar is correct, we know from the case of Lucy Steele, "a person who joined insincerity with ignorance" (*S&S*, 127),³ that Jane Austen could satirize bad grammar in her characters. When Lucy tells Elinor how she met Edward Ferrars at Longstaple, she manages to commit three distinct grammatical errors in one sentence: "It was there our acquaintance begun, for my sister and me was often staying with my unclé" (130). The English teachers among us may feel inclined to read Lucy's speeches with red pen in hand.

Lady Catherine De Bourgh, with all her advantages, and her principles about the necessity of "steady and regular instruction" (*P&P*, 165), would not be guilty of the basic errors in case and concord that Lucy commits. She has a fine flow of language, and is certainly never at a loss for words. However, on one occasion she perpetrates what nowadays we would call a "dangling modifier," the accidental association of a phrase



"While in their cradles, we planned the union."

with the wrong person or thing. The effect is irresistibly comic, because the misrelated phrase creates a mental picture that is the more absurd for being unintended.

Lady Catherine has come to Longbourn, in all the impressive state of her chaise and four, in order to frighten Elizabeth out of marrying Darcy:

“Mr. Darcy is engaged to marry *my daughter*. . . . The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of *his* mother, as well as of her's. While in their cradles, we planned the union.” (*P&P*, 354-55).

Ah, Lady Catherine, *gotcha!* And I shall deliver to you a brief lecture on grammar. I know, of course, perfectly well what you *mean*. You *mean* “While [our children were] in their cradles, we planned the union.” But what you have *said*, in syncopating that adverbial clause of time, allows your hearer to imagine that it was you and Lady Anne who were in the cradles—a picture not at all conducive to your dignity. And with the same pen with which I score your ambiguously syncopated clause, I provide a new illustration for *Pride and Prejudice*. Its caption is your own deliciously ambiguous words: “While in their cradles, we planned the union!”

NOTES

- ¹ “Is it Just?” *Temple Bar*, 67 (1883), p. 272.
- ² See his note to letter 143 in his edition of the *Letters*.
- ³ I use Chapman's edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen*.