

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: The Tale Told by Lady Catherine's House

Jane Austen is well-known for the economy of her writing; she was able to say a great deal on “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which [she] work[ed] with so fine a Brush” (Austen, “JA to James Edward Austen” 323). Austen chose her language carefully, so much so that her words and phrases often carry a lot of freight, sometimes overtly, but more often subtly. It is no surprise, then, that Austen’s narrator offers sly commentary about Rosings, the manor house of Darcy’s aunt, the “condescend[ing]” and hyper-class-conscious Lady Catherine de Bourgh: it is, Austen writes, “a handsome modern building, well situated on rising ground” (*Pride and Prejudice* 178). The description reminds one of another fictional country house created by Austen, the eponymous Mansfield Park, “a modern-built house [. . .] well-placed and well screened” (*Mansfield Park* 55).

Critics and commentators have long dealt with Austen’s acute awareness of both setting and class, as well as with her ironic treatment of the same. Tony Tanner observes that although Mansfield Park, the house, is “effectively a stronghold of Tory values” (146), it needs “new recruitments” to maintain “the ‘house’ because so many of its actual blood descendants go to the bad and betray their trust” (148). Beyond the fact that landed gentry were normally Tories, additional, specific support for Tanner’s alignment of Mansfield Park with Toryism can be found in the reading of the Bertrams, their friends, and their relatives: at Sotherton—the house to which Maria Bertram will go as the wife of its owner—Edmund Bertram, Fanny, and

Mary “loung[e] away the time” reading “Quarterly Reviews,” a periodical that is a Tory organ (121). The Rushworths, who own Sotherton, are of “the same interest” or political beliefs as the Bertrams (46). Granted, the Tory values of Mansfield Park itself are relatively young. Sir Thomas is a baronet, a member of a newer titled class that dates only from 1611. Thus, Sir Thomas Bertram’s ancestors—we do not know how far back in history his family baronetcy extends—must have been Tories and, thus, loyal to the monarchy that bestowed the Bertrams’ baronetcy. Compared with the Bertrams’ modern Mansfield Park, which, like the “well situated” Rosings, is “well-placed,” the other manor house that figures in the later novel, the Rushworths’ Sotherton, is identified as “built in Elizabeth’s time [. . .]. It is ill-placed. It stands in one of the lowest spots of the park” (*Mansfield Park* 66). Austen, again turning to her ironic forte, indicates that Sotherton’s owners have declined intellectually, for its owner, Mr. Rushworth, is, as Edmund immediately observes, “a very stupid fellow” (*Mansfield Park* 46). To return to Tanner’s observation, we see that Mansfield Park’s native inhabitants, too, have betrayed the Tory mansion’s established values: its owner, its incumbent, and its daughters are all guilty. In both the newer home, Mansfield Park, and the Elizabethan Sotherton, then, Austen is using the houses and their inherent, historic ethos to comment ironically on their current owners.

Yet Lady Catherine’s house in *Pride and Prejudice* receives cursory attention from critics—possibly because its mistress, the rude, controlling, pompous, and loquacious Lady Catherine, overshadows her house.¹ For example, after identifying Rosings with Chevening, an authentic country estate, Nigel Nicolson does not pursue Austen’s description of Rosings. And he admits that even this is questionable because “Rev. Collins’s parsonage [is] half a mile from the great house, while [. . .] the [Chevening] vicarage [is] close beside it” (Nicolson 177 qtd. in Rogers 499n6). Rosings’s actual model notwithstanding, Charles McCann offers a close reading of what Pemberley says about Darcy and what Netherfield tells us of Bingley; however, he ignores Rosings, another important country house in the novel. Thus, it is time that Rosings gets some analytical attention.

In volume 2, chapter 5, Elizabeth Bennet and the Lucases visit the Collinses—the former Charlotte Lucas and her husband, Mr. Collins. It is at this point that the narrator tells us that Rosings is a “handsome modern building, well situated on rising ground” (178). In the following chapter, as Elizabeth and her companions walk to Rosings, Mr. Collins brags of the wealth of his patroness, Lady Catherine. He is particularly thrilled with his “enumeration of the windows in front of the house,” and his relation of “*what the glazings altogether had originally cost* Sir Lewis de Bourgh,” Lady Catherine’s late husband (182; emphasis added).²

Traditionally, editors' notes about Collins's rapture with Rosings's glazing correctly inform readers of the window tax imposed between 1696 and 1851 (Rogers 499n2). A mansion with many windows clearly spoke to the owner's wealth and desire to show that wealth. While Collins thus brags of Sir Lewis de Bourgh's wealth and the size of his house, I propose that Austen was suggesting that the de Bourgh family was *nouveau riche*. That is, if Sir Lewis de Bourgh paid for Rosings's original glazing, then he oversaw and paid for the construction of Rosings. Consider, too, that when Elizabeth enters Pemberley, she is impressed with its "handsome" furniture, "neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendour, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings" (272). Hence, even Rosings's furnishings suggest *nouveau riche* tastes.

Rosings, as Austen says, is a modern—that is, Georgian³—building, and its glazing came at Sir Lewis de Bourgh's expense. It was not uncommon for the daughters of nobility, like Lady Catherine, the daughter of an earl, to marry wealthier men of lower social rank but higher economic standing. In fact, her late sister, Lady Anne Darcy, did just this: she married Darcy's father, who came from the "honorable [. . .] though untitled" (394) family that owned Pemberley, which is obviously not a "modern" building, as its library holdings are "the work of many generations" (41). The wealthy commoner husband certainly gained prestige by marrying a wife who retained her paternal courtesy title, as Ladies Catherine and Anne did.

When Lady Catherine visits Elizabeth to command her not to marry Darcy, she states that both the Darcys and the de Bourghs are "ancient" families (394).⁴ But is Lady Catherine's veracity to be trusted? In her angry hysteria at this moment, she also insists that her nephew, Darcy, and her daughter, Anne, "are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses" (394). Yet Darcy himself neither believes this promise nor chooses his life's mate with regard for any such promise. Moreover, the convivially chatty, even gossipy, Colonel Fitzwilliam never mentions any intention of his cousins to marry. Indeed, when the Colonel tells Elizabeth that Darcy is procrastinating on their departure from Rosings, he has no idea why and never surmises that it has anything to do with a potential de Bourgh–Darcy marriage.

Even if the de Bourghs are an "ancient," extremely wealthy family, as Lady Catherine insists, Austen suggests that they did not have a great country house until Sir Lewis de Bourgh built Rosings. Not only does the narrator undercut Lady Catherine's pride by giving her a "modern-built house," rather than a distinguished older house, but the man who paid for the house's original glazing and the man who brags about its costs do, too.

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Jane Austen, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, modern-built houses, Pride and Prejudice, Rosings, Tory

NOTES

1. Marilyn Butler, in *Jane Austen and the World of Ideas*, attempts to place *Pride and Prejudice* in a historically conservative framework in terms of the novelists that influenced Austen when writing it, but she gives little attention to Lady Catherine and none to her house. The most obvious place to find a discussion of Rosings and another “modern-built house,” the eponymous Mansfield Park, is Alistair Duckworth’s *The Improvement of the Estate*. Duckworth specifically examines estates and their manor houses in Austen’s novels in terms of their owners’ social and moral commitments. He compares those owners for whom “improvement” means change that respects the past and its values (e.g., Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*) with those for whom “improvement” means radically breaking with the past and functionality (e.g., Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*). Yet while Austen offers Rosings as a “modern-built house,” Duckworth does not offer it much attention. In the new scholarly edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, editor Pat Rogers deals with the window tax on Rosings, but does not comment on Rosings being modern (499n2). Neither does David Shapard in *The Annotated Pride and Prejudice*.

2. How old is the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh and could he have built a Georgian house? R. W. Chapman and Sir Frank MacKinnon demonstrate that he could have (400–408). The age of Sir Lewis’s daughter, Anne, is never given, but the oldest she can be is twenty-eight; Lady Catherine says that while Darcy and Anne were “in their cradles,” their mothers planned that they would marry (393). This could mean that the two cousins were in their cradles at the same time, thus making Anne around the same age as Darcy, who at the end of the novel is twenty-eight (410). Or Lady Catherine could mean that when Darcy was in his cradle some 27–28 years earlier, and then later when Anne was in hers, the Fitzwilliam sisters had made the agreement—if it was made at all. Let us say, then, that Anne is between twenty-one and twenty-eight, meaning that the earliest she could have been born was around 1783. Assuming that Sir Lewis was between thirty and forty at Anne’s birth, he would have been born between 1743 and 1753, putting him in the right age bracket to build a Georgian house and pay for its original glazing.

3. Dana Arnold observes that Austen uses the word “modern” to refer to a building of the Georgian period (140).

4. Pat Rogers observes that scholars using Pemberley’s long gallery and staircase as clues have suggested that Pemberley “most likely dates from the Elizabethan or Jacobean period” (520–21n17). Darcy, then, has maintained the historic values and ethos of Pemberley, and so Austen does not treat the house and its owner ironically in terms of his stewardship of the estate.

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