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Darcy on Film

SUE BIRTWHISTLE AND SUSIE CONKLIN

A Conversation with Colin Firth†

Colin Firth played Darcy in the 1995 BBC television production of *Pride and Prejudice*. Andrew Davies wrote the screenplay; Simon Langton was the director.

Andrew Davies says that he wanted to convey that there is more to Darcy than we at first think. How did you try to communicate this?
You really can't walk into a room and start acting your socks off, and doing all sorts of ambitious things, because Darcy wouldn't do that. But *not* doing anything is one of the most difficult things about acting. I remember thinking before I started that I was going to have to get together a very lively, dynamic, varied performance and then not act it. For example, in that first assembly-room scene I have to go in and be hurt, angry, intimidated, annoyed, irritated, amused, horrified, appalled, and keep all these reactions within this very narrow framework of being inscrutable because nobody ever knows quite what Darcy's thinking. I've played some far more physically energetic parts, but I don't think that I've ever been as physically exhausted at the end of a take as I have with Darcy.

I remember this particularly from the scene where Elizabeth and I have the argument at Netherfield: Darcy's emotional and doesn't want her to know it, he hates her because he fancies her, he hates her for being cleverer than he is during this particular conversation, and he's got the Bingleys as an audience. So there are a million things going on inside him, yet he has to keep himself together and not show that he is in the slightest bit ruffled; he mustn't reveal his turmoil. So he sits there, as still and calm as his emotions can possibly allow. Technically, you just try to assume all that and then play against it.

* * *

† From Sue Birtwhistle and Susie Conklin, *The Making of Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin, 1995) 99–105. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

What's interesting when you're doing a part like this is if you can find fluidity from moment to moment. When something is somehow not truthful, it jars because you've got to try to force your imagination to think up justifications for what you're doing. I never had to do that with Darcy—or very rarely—and it suddenly hit me that Jane Austen really did have an instinctive grasp of Darcy's inner self, even though she didn't have the arrogance to write it. But she writes the outer man so logically that the inside 'plays'.

Can you think of a specific example?
I remember thinking that it makes sense when Darcy slights Elizabeth at the Meryton assembly. I agree to go to a party with my friend Bingley. He encourages me: 'Come on, it'll be a great party with lots of women.' I arrive. I'm terribly shy—terribly uneasy in social situations anyway. This is not a place I'd normally go to, and I don't know how to talk to these people. So I protect myself behind a veneer of snobbishness and rejection. Bingley immediately engages with the most attractive woman in the room, and that makes me feel even less secure. He comes bounding over with a big, enthusiastic smile and tells me I should be dancing. I say, 'You've got the best-looking girl in the room,' and he replies, 'Well, never mind—what about the less attractive sister?' and this exacerbates the position I've put myself in. Then I say, 'She's okay, but not good enough for me,' but what I'm really saying is: 'Look, I'm supposed to be better than you, so don't give me the plain sister. I'm not even going to consider her.' By keeping this in mind when filming, I found that the scene actually played itself.

At the end of the story Darcy tells Lizzy that he doesn't know when he first fell in love with her. But you would have needed to plot his journey more specifically.
Yes, it's very interesting to watch out for the triggers that lead to Darcy's falling in love. Of course, love often starts with something trivial that attracts your attention. In Darcy's case, very little had ever attracted his attention. So I think the first trigger is the moment when Elizabeth rejects him so impertinently—when she overhears him saying, 'She's tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*.' When she walks past and gives him a cheeky look, Andrew was very helpful here in writing: 'Darcy was used to looking at other people like that, but was not used to being looked at like that himself.' So at that moment, I think, he notices her simply out of bewilderment and curiosity; he becomes intrigued by her, which, I suspect, is the first time he has ever been intrigued by a woman, and he has to know a little bit more about her. It strikes me that you can be on a fatal course from a moment like that whether you know it or not.

Darcy starts to show his interest in Elizabeth during the Lucases' party, when he asks her to dance and she refuses. What did you feel was happening to him at this stage?
Up to this point I don't think Darcy has ever really looked at a woman—I mean looked with real eyes, with real interest—though he's admired women in a casual way. The truth is that he's very bored. He's one of the richest men in England, and until now that's always been enough to make him attractive to women. I remember reading a very helpful saying: 'A man who is eligible needs to entertain no one.' For me, that was a great key to understanding Darcy—I thought that if he were charming as well, life could be intolerable for him. So out of both shyness and a lack of necessity he remains aloof. Then Elizabeth comes along and actually gives him a chance to respond, and it's probably the first opportunity he's ever had in his life to be the pursuer rather than the pursued: it's irresistible. That's when he first notices her eyes. What starts off as intriguing becomes profoundly erotic for him.

And she finally does agree to dance with him at the Netherfield ball . . .
Yes. I think the sequence where they dance together is wonderful because it lays out the whole of their relationship at that point perfectly. We see an honesty and playfulness in Elizabeth, while there's something slightly comical about Darcy trying to maintain his formal manner while holding up his end of the repartee. She'll say something that stings him, and he has an entire eight-step circle to do before he is permitted to respond.

Jane Austen offers some clues here as to Darcy's resolution to hold back and cure himself of this 'madness' he's just contracted, but he's in over his head before he realizes what has happened. To begin with, it was a bit of sport. And then suddenly he's feeling vulnerable and resents it bitterly. Several times he decides that he is going to pull himself together, and this is when his behaviour becomes rather confusing and paradoxical—he's pursuing and rejecting Elizabeth at the same time. He's certain he won't dance with her, and then he asks her to dance; he waits in places where he knows he'll find her walking and then doesn't speak to her; he shows up at Hunsford Parsonage and then acts as if she had called on him.

You had to film Darcy's first proposal scene in the second week of filming. How did that affect you?
It seemed a catastrophe at first. Everybody knows how important the scene is. For scheduling reasons we had to film a lot of Darcy's later scenes first—where he appears a much nicer person—and then do this scene with him at breaking point. Because it's so inappropriate to do it early and it's so nerve-racking, we gave it a tremendous amount of attention and got a degree of adrenalin working up to it, so that perhaps

it's invested with something that it would never have had if we had done it later, when everyone had settled in. It was a case of jumping in at the deep end, and Simon Langton handled it brilliantly.

How did you approach this scene?
I asked myself some extremely basic questions about what it was I wanted to do in the scene. I asked, 'What's my character trying to get?' and then, 'How will he overcome any obstacles that are in the way?' In this case, the main question was: 'How is Elizabeth going to make it difficult for me, and how am I going to make it difficult for myself?' If you address problems like these, you come up with ways and means that help to make the approach clear.

I felt, for instance, that when Darcy goes into that room and says those shocking things—'I'm too good for you, but will you marry me anyway?'—if I played it as if I knew I were being shocking and arrogant, it would never work. I realized that I had to make it the most reasonable thing in the world to say, but I wondered, 'How do I do that? How do I turn that extraordinary speech about her family connections being utterly disastrous into something reasonable?' And I thought, 'Okay, let's think ourselves into the time for a moment, into 1813,' and from Jane Austen's perspective this business about appropriate and inappropriate marriages made an awful lot of sense. It might be a disaster to cross class barriers; it could lead to all sorts of misery and unhappiness; the social fabric of the time was threatened by it, and so on.

He is also arrogant enough to think he has bestowed an enormous gift on her. Every woman he has ever met would say 'yes' to a proposal from him. It would be insane for Lizzy to say 'no', not because he assumes she finds him attractive—I don't think that's the reason—but because it's the most practical offer that even someone considerably her social superior could ever hope to receive. I think he assumes, as everybody would at that time, that it would be a Cinderella ending for her.

And so Darcy is coming in with a very imprudent proposal, as he sees it. He's saying to her, 'I'm going to put to you a proposal that may make me seem rash, irresponsible and even, possibly, juvenile, but I don't want you to believe I'm those things. I have thought through every detail of this; I know that my family will be angry, that people will frown on us and that our social positions are very different. So don't think that I haven't dealt with these issues—don't imagine that I'm just some reckless schoolboy. Nevertheless, having thought it all through, I find that my love for you is so overwhelming that these objections are rendered insignificant.' And, from that point of view, it's a terribly romantic proposal. I was a bit hurt when we filmed it, and everybody thought I was saying something terrible: I had got myself so far into the notion that he had come in with a really charming

thing to say. Of course, when you watch it, you don't see it from his point of view. You see a self-important man entering and expressing these pompous sentiments as if they were the most natural reactions in the world and then having the gall to be astonished by Elizabeth's rejection—and I think that's right. But I couldn't have played that astonishment without approaching it the way I did.

* * *

Does Lizzy's rejection effect any real changes in Darcy, then?
Oh, yes. You cannot think that Darcy is simply going to return to the way he was. The fact that he writes her a letter explaining himself and disclosing some very personal information—which is ostensibly a tremendously out-of-character thing to do—suggests this. I think he suffers enormously as a result of her rejection because he loves her. I think he endures torment because a lifetime's behaviour, even his very character, has been thrown into relief by her words.

His real crime, I think, is silliness. I know that's a terribly undignified way to look at him, but I believe his failing is foolish, superficial, social snobbery, and that's the bitter lesson he has to learn. And I think in that sense he does change. He actually says in the book that his father instilled in him good values but also taught him to think meanly of the world outside his own social circle. He is rather afraid of anything outside his immediate experience and is quite convinced that he will encounter nothing but barbarianism. People do make assumptions about other areas of civilization, and that's precisely what Darcy does. It's ignorance.

He learns his lesson when he falls in love with one of those barbarians and realizes that she's at least his equal, if not his superior, in terms of wit, intellectual agility and sense of personal dignity. He is so profoundly challenged by her that his old prejudices cannot be upheld. I still think he'll always have something of the old view—he'll always be disgusted by ridiculous, boring people who talk too much. I don't think he'll ever learn to adore Mrs. Bennet or develop an enormous admiration for Sir William Lucas.

And, of course, he hasn't quite learned to laugh at himself. He's learned to criticize himself, which is probably the first step, but he doesn't yet know how to find himself ridiculous and enjoy it. With Lizzy as a partner, however, married life will be a matter of survival, and it's plain that he's going to learn *that* lesson before too long.

* * *

CHERYL L. NIXON

[Darcy in Action]†

* * *

In [Andrew] Davies's screenplay of *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy is cast as an awkward hero tortured by an excess of emotions he cannot express. With his tousled dark hair, smoldering eyes that stare deeply into middle space, and a pained self-consciousness in social situations, he is convincingly reimagined as a vaguely Byronic hero. A brooding loner who can neither physically contain nor verbally express his inner emotional battles, Darcy engages in a roster of physical activities that do not appear in the novel but which convey these battles to the viewer. The film's additions envision Darcy playing billiards, bathing, fencing, and swimming. As Darcy's pursuit of Elizabeth becomes more certain, his physical activities are increasingly replaced by meditative stares which, in turn, become increasingly direct; this expression of longing peaks when he spends a tumultuous night pacing back and forth to his window while attempting to write a response to her rejection of his marriage proposal. Darcy's physical activities reveal the violence of his emotions while his longing stares restate his inability to express verbally those emotions. While Darcy displays emotional restraint, he physically displays that which he is restraining. Darcy's physical activities create a cinematic form of self-expression, a dialogue between his mind and body that runs throughout the entire film but is absent from the novel.

* * *

Darcy's physical reactions to Elizabeth quickly order themselves into an easily interpreted grammar of emotional signs. In [a] fabricated Netherfield scene, Darcy's physicality is emphasized as a complement to Elizabeth's, signaling an emotional connection between the two. The film intercuts images of Darcy taking a bath with images of Elizabeth frolicking with a large dog. Darcy's uninhibited physicality mirrors Elizabeth's. After seeing the naked Darcy being bathed by a servant while lounging and sighing in a large tub, we see Elizabeth walking outside and coming upon a large dog, which she laughs at and immediately starts to chase. This image is interrupted by that of the bathing Darcy, getting out of the tub and being helped into his robe. While still wet and tousled, Darcy peers out the window at Elizabeth, who is tugging at a stick in the dog's mouth. Darcy longingly gazes at Eliza-

† From "Balancing the Courtship Hero: Masculine Emotional Display in Film Adaptations of Austen's Novels," in *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, ed. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) 31–35.

beth for a lengthy space of time. Each character's natural self is revealed; each is removed from his or her constraining societal role, enjoying an unguarded moment and reveling—sighing and laughing—in bodily pleasure. At this early stage in the film, when the novel still has Darcy and Elizabeth bristling at one another, the viewer cannot help but feel that the two are connected both physically and emotionally.

* * *

These added scenes of masculine physicality are easily equated with their unspoken emotional content: Darcy's growing and continuing love. The film's interest in Darcy's bodily struggle with his emotions is best evidenced by the scene in which he writes a letter responding to Elizabeth's rejection of his first marriage proposal. In the novel, the letter's text is given to the reader after it has been received by Elizabeth; its content is, in effect, voiced by Elizabeth because the reader reads it as Elizabeth reads it. In contrast, the film gives the viewer the text of the letter as Darcy is writing it. The letter is read aloud by Darcy, not Elizabeth. The mental activity of reading is translated into the physical activity of writing. The letter is no longer a symbol of Elizabeth's misinterpretation and reevaluation of the past "text" of Darcy. Rather, the letter becomes a means of showing Darcy's emotional depth and conveying his struggle at self-expression. A quiet scene of silent reading in which the female reader is being persuaded becomes an emotionally charged scene of masculine writing in which the writer argues his case. The activity of letter-writing creates another opportunity for Darcy to express his internal self through external activity—and another opportunity to note that this is how the twentieth century, and not Austen, expresses masculinity.

* * *

The "extra Darcy" presented in these scenes is extra emotion. Darcy's added physical display of emotion provides a radical revision of the masculine balance Austen advocates between personal expression and social restraint. For example, in the film adaptation, Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy's first marriage proposal can be read as a rejection due to his inability to voice his full emotions. Compared with his doting stares, billiard playing, bathing, fencing, and swimming, Darcy's proposal seems restrained; although he expresses his love, he is unable to put his hidden emotions into a verbal vocabulary that matches the intensity of his physical vocabulary. His private desires are held back by public considerations of social inequality. Viewing the film, we feel Elizabeth is right to reject him; he has not given full expression to the depth of the emotions we, the audience, know him to have. In contrast, the novel can be read as constructing the scene

according to completely opposite dictates. Darcy's proposal is rejected because he has displayed too much of his emotions rather than too little. Darcy does not show proper courtship restraint and propose according to proper social form; after Elizabeth rejects him, he himself says, "These bitter accusations might have been suppressed, had I with greater policy concealed my struggles, and flattered you into the belief of my being impelled by unqualified, unalloyed inclination. . . . But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related." In contrast to the film, which places the same verbal expression within the context of emotionally charged physical expression, the text positions this verbal expression as an unexpected outburst from a character who has displayed almost no emotion in any form. Austen's Darcy has suddenly displayed too much emotional freedom: he expresses his love openly and then openly states the frustrating barriers his love has overcome. Is Darcy's proposal too expressive, as the novel might have it, or not expressive enough, as the film has it? The answer is both; he exists as both in two different *Pride and Prejudice* texts. Masculine emotional display has been envisioned differently by each; it provides a telling example of how Austen's "balance" has been reformulated and paradoxically maintained by today's audience, an audience that expects masculinity to evidence balance through emotional display.

* * *