

By the same author

*Shakespeare's God: A Theological Criticism
of the Great Tragedies*

Mr Collins Considered

Approaches to Jane Austen

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Routledge & Kegan Paul
London and New York

First published in 1987 by
Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Published in the USA by
Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc.
in association with Methuen Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Set in 10/12pt Sabon
by Inforum Limited, Portsmouth
and printed in Great Britain
by St Edmundsbury Press Ltd
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Morris, Ivor.

Mr. Collins considered.

Includes index.

1. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817—Characters—Mr.
Collins. 2. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817—Criticism and
interpretation. 3. Collins, Mr. (Fictitious character)
4. Clergy in literature. 5. Social ethics in literature.

I. Title II. Title: Mister Collins considered.

PR4038.C47M67 1987 823'.7 86-20266

British Library CIP Data also available
ISBN 0-7102-1005-1

661340

PR
4038
C47 M67
1987

To
A.J.N. and C.V.H.



Dearth



If Mr Collins is in many ways a representative figure, why is he so sharply distinguished from other characters as an object of amusement? The answer lies of course in his foolishness; but one must be ready here to meet any Polonius-like objection to the attempt to define true folly – for there is plenty of method in evidence. Mr Collins's fault can in fact be seen as taking the ways of his world rather too seriously: founding his own thinking so thoroughly upon them, or using them so largely as a substitute for thought, as to leave little scope for real awareness or individuality. His career may thus be looked upon as a study, diverting, as all such studies must be, in small-mindedness – of the deadly effect of literalism. For he conducts himself according to the letter rather than in the spirit of his times.

Mr Collins's presence can be a trifle wearisome, as persons as diverse as Mr Bennet and Mrs Collins quickly discover; and one might well be tempted to view him in the light of Mr Elliot's definition of good company as being constituted by birth, education and manners, and at a pinch dispensing with education. The rule has its stringencies, and would certainly disqualify Mr Collins; but is it very much of a guide? A veritable mountain of noble nurture has been in labour only to bring forth the mouse of a Lady Dalrymple; and the author of the maxim which would admit him to the elect is himself more than a little of a rogue. In estimating any of the characters one surely cannot do better than apply those universal standards of virtue, sense and taste to which, according to David Cecil, each of them is inflexibly related by the author.¹



Good sense, the eighteenth century's prime canon of excellence, does not excite us – but it can affect one of Jane Austen's heroines quite otherwise. Having perceived Colonel Brandon to be a man so possessed, Elinor Dashwood composedly assures the disparaging Marianne and Willoughby, 'sense will always have attractions for me.' To Anne Elliot it is as much a gratification, on meeting him for the first time, to know that the future owner of Kellynch is undoubtedly a gentleman having an air of good sense, as it is to learn later that she has won his approval. The inelegance and confusion of her parents' house in Portsmouth impels Fanny Price to a new appreciation of her home at Mansfield Park. True, warmth of family affection is not much to be found there; but 'If tenderness could ever be supposed wanting,' she muses, 'good sense and good breeding supplied its place.' So sovereign is this attribute that one touch of it, seemingly, can make the whole world congenial.

In the characters of Colonel Brandon and William Walter Elliot, we are given to understand what is comprised in it. Sense denotes first a thorough knowledge of life, and intelligence of a high degree. The Colonel is a man of considerable experience, reads widely, and has 'a thinking mind'; Mr Elliot likewise displays knowledge of the world, a good understanding, and a discretion which, while respecting the set ways of common thought, is not governed by them. Both are men of polished and engaging manners suffused with apparent kindness, Brandon in particular, as Elinor observes, being 'on every occasion mindful of the feelings of others'. Elliot exhibits in good measure the temperateness and restraint which is, perhaps, the distinguishing outward property of sense: he is 'steady, observant, moderate, candid'; yet there lives, beneath this self-possession, a discernment more sensitive and profound than that known in characters readily moved to enthusiasm.

The presence of sense is very quickly recognisable. Lady Middleton's habitual reserve soon reveals itself to Elinor as 'a mere calmness of manner with which sense had nothing to do'; whereas a few minutes of Mr Elliot's company, when he calls in Camden-place at ten o'clock on the first evening of her stay, is sufficient to create certainty in Anne. 'His tone, his expression, his choice of subject, his knowing where to stop, – it was all the

the good angel in Miss Austen's stories. Her characters are at their best when advised by their hearts, and most of their errors come from their heads.¹⁴ When Emma puts her preconceptions aside and is advised by her heart, the disabling assumptions, the snobberies and the inhumanities which have been engrafted upon her own personality – and for which society rather than the heroine is to be blamed – disappear.

This intensification of a character's social conditioning for the purposes of a critical, and indeed a satirical, art is of course found in Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is the arrogance of rank personified. But it is also found in her nephew. The intriguing parallel existing between Mr Darcy and Mr Collins, evident in their ways of courtship – and perhaps most clearly so in the pronouncements upon its object's inferiority of connection by the one, and of wealth by the other – extends to their characters. Each expresses his inmost sentiments with vigour and abandon. In Darcy we are given a man to whom disguise of any sort is abhorrent: in Mr Collins, a man who is almost incapable of any sort of disguise. Both contrive to exasperate Elizabeth Bennet; but that someone of Darcy's pretension should do so by his mode of address, in the very process of asking for his lady's hand, is a circumstance truly remarkable. Its strangeness does not escape Elizabeth. When Darcy complains at the uncompromisingness of the negative which has greeted his speech, she is driven to inquire 'why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil?'

It was more than excuse: it was invitation. And its oddity suggests to Richard Simpson that the author, in constructing her chief characters, 'sometimes lets her theory run away with her'. His argument is very much to the point.

Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is the proud man; but he is a gentleman by birth and education, and a gentleman in feeling. Would it be possible for such a man, in making a proposal of marriage to a lady whose only fault in his eyes is that some of her connections are vulgar, to do so in the way in which Darcy makes

his overtures to Elizabeth? It is true that great pains are taken to explain this wonderful lapse of propriety. But, all the explanations notwithstanding, an impression is left on the reader that either Darcy is not so much of a gentleman as he is represented, or that his conduct is forced a little beyond the line of nature in order the better to illustrate the theory of his biographer.¹⁵

Margaret Kennedy is also disturbed at Darcy's uncouthness – so much so, that she is tempted into overstatement, and is ready to think that he 'only exists to play scenes with Elizabeth', despite elsewhere finding him real and convincing. And she notes that the inadmissible conduct is not confined to this scene, but that 'his extreme insolence, at the first Meryton ball, does not match his later behaviour'.¹⁶

It is indeed the 'theory of his biographer' which produces this swerving from the natural line into inconsistency – for Darcy is at these moments the embodiment of the social vices she deplores. With literary skill, and depth of human understanding, she makes him conscious of his inadequacy, and its cause. As an only son, he confides to Elizabeth at the end, he was spoilt by a father and mother who, though good themselves, 'allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own.' His parents, in fact, combined the stature of Sir Thomas Bertram with the illiberality of Mrs Norris. This might explain his rudeness to Elizabeth at the ball – but it can never excuse the manner of his wooing. For to a degree Darcy is there the expression of social trends and forces which Jane Austen deprecates. At that point, as well as being himself, he is a device of the satirist.

As he is during that visit to Hunsford Parsonage, so is the incumbent of the parish all the time. Aspects of ill social and human are of course to be found distributed in greater or lesser measure in the make-up of the persons of the novels. But it is possible for a writer to make a more thorough representation, and place much or all in a single character.

A happening of this kind occurs, with pathetic and terrible import, amidst the surges of tragic disillusionment in *King Lear*.