



## OF THE USE OF SECONDARY CHARACTERS

### Some Notes on Lady Catherine and Mr Collins in three Filmic Adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*

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#### *I- Some aspects of characterization*

Already in Austen's novel, description contributes to characterization. It mainly concerns features such as size. Heroes all tend to be tall, and size conveys also a moral impression, as a sign of nobility and moral integrity. Thus physical description expresses more than simple appearance. However, the positive evaluation of tall size is not systematic. For instance, the literary Collins is tall, but his size is qualified negatively by his shape, he is "heavy-looking." In the 2005 film, Joe Wright insists on the small size of Collins and plays upon it dramatically, especially as contrasting with Darcy's towering presence. The same kind of choice is made with Lydia who, in the book, is the tallest of the Bennett daughters whereas she is rather small in the film.

The eyes feature also prominently in the novel, not so much in terms of their shape or colour but as associated with expressiveness. Liz has seductive eyes ("a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman" [19], "their colour and shape, and the eye-lashes, so remarkably fine" [36] etc.). The body has an expressive value and beauty is of course an essential criterion. There is a hierarchy in terms of beauty, and specific terms are used to express that beauty, either male or female. Words characterizing men's beauty such as "handsome," "elegant," "fine," abound in the text. Apart from Darcy's description, the portrait of Wickham provides a good example of an equation between beauty and truth. As regards women, the lexis is more varied and more detailed. The stress is laid on the figure, the features of the face, the complexion. The figure of Elizabeth is "light and pleasing" and Darcy considers her as one of the handsomest women even though he admits there is in her "more than one failure of perfect symmetry." For Darcy, smile is an essential feature, as his smiling portrait illustrates. In Wright's film, Darcy's smile is delayed almost to the end of the film. The actor keeps a grim face throughout, so as to highlight the radiant smile that illuminates his face (reflected in a mirror) as he embraces Georgiana. There is thus, as already pointed out by numerous critics, in particular Ariane

Hudelet,<sup>1</sup> a metonymical dimension of the Austenian body, which is perceived by means of its effects upon other people. Beauty or other physical features are present in the perception of the characters. What is fore-grounded is the reaction of the onlookers. A cinematic equivalent would be the reaction shot, part of the editing process, which is used recurrently in the films. At this level, the two characters we shall focus on, Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, stand apart as their physical ugliness or at least grotesqueness is highlighted both in the novel and the three filmic versions.

A large part of the audience expects something from a filmic adaptation, especially when the source novel is a literary classic, part of the canon. This "horizon of expectation" is, according to H. R. Jauss,<sup>2</sup> made of the reading of the novel, but also of the imaginary blend composed of multiple cultural signs associated with Austen and her time. This imaginary is built by the sources of the period (literature, painting), but also by means of previous filmic representations. Among these expectations, the physical appearance of the characters prevails. Contrary to the relative haziness of literary incarnations (which leaves ground for the reader's imagination), the filmic form implies a very precise incarnation, which could indeed be detrimental to characterization in the sense that it fixes meaning and prevents polysemy. A fictional character is strongly embodied by an actor. His appearance can't remain elusive or uncertain, except in some types of films, such as crime or horror movies, where identity may remain partly concealed until revelation. In the type of film (and cultural context) represented by *Pride and Prejudice*, it is difficult to conceal physical appearance because the plot is based on communication, social exchanges and collective rituals as well as more intimate scenes. As soon as the character appears on the screen, the spectator receives a mass of information. In the novel, Elizabeth is revealed gradually through the remarks and comments of other characters and through her own words whereas on her first appearance, Keira Knightley (or Jennifer Ehle or Greer Garson) informs our reception of the character. On screen, all characters have specific images, explicit bodies, whereas in a novel, secondary characters are not necessarily described. Hence the importance of casting choices as regards for example, Collins and Lady Catherine.

In Wright's film, Lady Catherine is impersonated by a very famous actress, Judy Dench, celebrated for her Shakespearian parts and also for her historical parts such as Elizabeth I or Queen Victoria. She has a "British quality" label and an aristocratic image, which she imposes by means of her physical presence, haughtiness, and facial expressiveness. She plays the part very differently from the other filmic incarnations—the grotesque, almost campy impersonation by Edna Mae Oliver (also a well known actress, famous for her part in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) in the MGM version, and the more subdued interpretation provided by Barbara Leigh-Hunt in the BBC version. Mr Collins is another interesting case in point, as we shall see.

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<sup>1</sup> See her excellent study of the novel and film in the CNED volume, Armand Colin, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> H. R. Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978.

## II- Main features of Collins's character in the novel

Mr Collins is indeed a relatively important character, though a secondary one. He is first mentioned casually in chapter XIII: "I have reason to expect an addition to our family party"<sup>3</sup> [41]. Because of the double definition subsequently given by Mr. Bennett, "a gentleman and a stranger," there is a risk of confusion with Mr Bingley. In fact, Collins is a remote cousin who has never been seen but who is from the outset presented in a negative light, as a threat to the family, as a future heir who will dispossess them of Longbourn because of the entail. As Mr Bennett puts it rather brutally: "When I am dead, he may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases" [42]. The fact that no one in the family has ever seen him testifies to his lack of interest. However Mr Bennett, after having read his letter, seems to give a positive evaluation: "Peacemaking gentleman," "conscientious and polite young man," but this is only to pass a very derogatory judgement, with an ironical touch, in answer to Elizabeth's query: "There is a mixture of servility and self importance in his letter which promises well. I am impatient to see him" [44]. We could add that Mr Collins is expected as a case to be observed. Collins is thus from the outset presented as an intruder, as a molieresque "fâcheux," but also as a predator. This aspect is taken up in all three versions, but more conspicuously in Wright's adaptation.

The clergyman is also linked to the Bennets through the motif of marriage and he provides a grotesque caricature-like variation of this central theme of the novel which contrasts two conceptions of marriage, marriage as a money-matter ("matter-money")—to quote a portmanteau word used by Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett—and marriage as romantic interest. Collins only pretends (or imagines) that he is in love. As the narrator states concerning his feelings for Lizzie: "His regard for her was quite imaginary" [77].

Collins is also seen as a degraded version of the gentleman and of course strongly contrasted with Darcy, all the more so as he, for a while, courts the same woman. The Netherfield ball scene in the Wright film emphasizes this contrast, pitting Collins against Darcy in an almost comic way since the dwarfish Collins almost bumps into the tall Darcy who turns his back to him. Lastly, Collins is associated with Lady Catherine, because of his status as rector of a Parish and because she has given him Hunsford, which abuts her estate.

A large amount of textual space is devoted to Collins in the novel and he appears in several prominent scenes, at Longbourn with his grotesque love declaration, at the Netherfield ball where he literally chases Elizabeth up and stays close to her all evening, at Hunsford where he welcomes Lizzie after his wedding with Charlotte Lucas and finally at Rosings. The only place he is not admitted to is Pemberley. He also plays an important part as a letter writer, but on the other hand, he is not a reader except for Fordyce's sermons and he never reads novels, contrary to Elizabeth. The fact that he is

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Norton critical edition, London, 2001. All the quotations from the book refer to that edition.

a bad reader may serve as a metaphor for his inability to understand (read) other characters and he is, of course, particularly mistaken as regards Elizabeth.

In the respective films, Collins plays a relatively important part. Obviously he features more prominently in the BBC version because of the length of that version, but his part is fore-grounded for other reasons in the 2005 version. In the MGM version, the characterization is simpler, stressing the preposterousness of the character. Lady Catherine, though she belongs to a different social class, has in fact many points in common with Collins and this is also highlighted in the three filmic versions.

### *III- Collins and Lady Catherine as antagonists*

While Lady Catherine is an open antagonist and develops as such in a climactic scene of the novel, Collins starts as a potential helper, but soon turns into a nuisance as he tries to impose himself and is obviously concerned with the potential inheritance as much as with sentimental matters. He is indeed, from the outset, presented as a threat in the films, especially in the Wright version, through the strange, almost uncanny shot on his truncated body, split vertically, seen through the half-open door. We next see his whole face, carrying a heavy box and books. However this "positive" image is immediately destroyed by the following shot on the lower part of his face as he swallows food voraciously. This abrupt shift from the man of learning to the glutton testifies to the ambivalence of the man and provides an ironical outlook from the outset. His predatory character is emphasized through the meal scene where he keeps eating and praising the food, but also casts glances at the girls, especially Jane, and Elizabeth. The camera closes up on the potatoes (object of his praise), but also offers another close up of his mouth. Later he is seen in the foreground of the screen in backlighting as he tries to establish some kind of complicity with Mrs Bennet. At that moment, the camera tracks back to reveal, in the foreground, a two shot of Mrs Bennet and Collins, involved in some form of conspiracy. They are both filmed in close up while the background (the rest of the family) remains out of focus. When Mrs Bennett regretfully tells Collins that Jane, the primary object of his affection—or, rather, lust—is soon to be engaged, she offers Elizabeth as a compensation and second best. At that moment, the camera zooms forward and refocuses on Lizzie whose profile, even at a distance, is enhanced by a very pictorial lighting. At that moment, a reversal takes place and the two conspirators are in turn out of focus, which suggests their manipulative intent. The composition of the frame establishes a triangle between the pair in the foreground and Lizzie, remote, but at the centre of the frame. When Collins turns round again towards us, the camera isolates him and closes up on his pensive face, muttering approvingly: "Indeed, indeed!"

When Collins later appears at the Netherfield ball, he is spotted very early on by the camera as he is looking for Elizabeth, and the camera tracks forward inside the hall following on his steps. He pops up later, from behind a pillar, while Elizabeth is told of Wickham's absence, and asks her for a dance, also threatening to keep close to her throughout the evening. During

the dance, Collins tries in vain to speak to Elizabeth. He is constantly separated from her by the shift of partners. Later on, he is again spotted by the camera, alone in the centre of the room, plucking up a flower. So the camera only favours him to suggest his exclusion and his failure. This anticipates the declaration scene, which will confirm his rejection. So he does represent a potential threat for Elizabeth, but this threat is rather easily dismissed thanks also to the complicity of Mr Bennet.

Lady Catherine is also a threat, a dangerous antagonist, in particular when she realizes Darcy may have a love interest that goes against her plans of marrying him to her sickly daughter. Both the BBC version and Wright's film stress this aspect. However the MGM version provides an unexpected metamorphosis of Lady Catherine—Edna Mae Oliver. As in the novel, she visits Lizzie in order to attempt to dissuade her from marrying Darcy. She believes in rumours that circulate, while nothing is attested. In the MGM film, not knowing the real part played by Lady Catherine as an emissary of Darcy, Lizzie rebuffs her, refusing to promise anything. The surprise comes from seeing Darcy outside the house, sitting in a carriage and waiting for his aunt. There is thus a stress on a recovered harmony, which completes the happy ending. But of course this goes against the grain of Austen's main discourse and critical approach to people like Lady Catherine. The BBC version stays closer to the novelistic scene, with a rather un-theatrical but convincing impersonation, staging the scene mostly outward and emphasizing the hardly repressed fury and dismay of Lady Catherine by means of expressive close-ups on her face.

Joe Wright dramatizes the part considerably, with the help of a formidable actress, Dame Judy Dench. The last scene of his film offers an epitome of this exacerbation of the character, which is achieved through a series of transformations—including some in the written text—and a hyperbolic type of *mise en scène*. There is a significant change of setting, a good example of the strategy of displacement often used in the film. In the novel and the BBC version, the scene takes place in the morning and mostly in a secluded part of the garden, at Lady Catherine's request. In Wright's version, the confrontation between Elizabeth and Lady de Bourgh is dramatized by the shift of time. The meeting takes place at night, thus making the intrusiveness more blatant, especially in regard to the code of behaviour between different social spheres, and inside the house, thus foregrounding the claustrophobic character of the scene. Moreover, the night mood enables an almost expressionistic use of lighting which affects in particular Lady Catherine's countenance and transforms her into a less than human character, some kind of gargoyle (whereas the text never describes her expression, only referring to her « ungracious air » [229]). While the scene is totally private in the text and in the BBC version, it's most probably overheard in the film—all the Bennets, even the father, are listening behind the door which opens suddenly—where there is no final reconciliation (which there is in the novel). Thus Collins and Lady Catherine are constructed as antagonists and intruders.

#### *IV- Satirical targets*

Both Lady Catherine and Collins are also the targets of Austen's satire and this feature is aptly reflected in the filmic versions. They both stand for a discourse of authority and they are satirized on account of their manners, their rather stilted and hierarchic vision of society and their relation to "absolute truth," another important aspect of the novel.

Lady Catherine is in a position of authority as a landed aristocrat and has a discourse that emphasizes the superiority of her class. In Wright's version in particular, this is fore-grounded by the tone she adopts, the way she orders people about, the way she distributes parts, attributes places, constantly asks questions, expecting normative answers, in matters of education, for example. This is exemplified by the series of questions addressed to Elizabeth concerning the upbringing of her sisters. The over-decorated setting of Rosings, the presence of huge paintings—mythological scenes with nude bodies—testifies to the ostentatious attitude of Lady Catherine, and ultimately to her lack of taste. The unease and sense of enclosure felt by the characters are emphasized by the choice of lighting, the semi-darkness and the presence of shadows. This contrasts strongly with the luminous atmosphere of Pemberley, the views on the park seen through the window (a *veduta* motif), the harmony that prevails between architecture, landscape and works of art, in the sculpture gallery scene.

Collins is seen as an imitator of lady Catherine and of aristocratic behaviour in general. This idea of imitation is conveyed through the physical attitudes of Collins, mimicking the gentlemen in a very clumsy and comic way, contorting his body to look elegant. His speech is a mere repetition of lady Catherine's and he is also compared with a parrot, which comically stresses the analogy. In the MGM version, Collins admires himself in the mirror and carefully rehearses his gestures and words. His behaviour is accompanied by a light comedic music, taken up afterwards diegetically by Elizabeth's playing of a harp. In the BBC version, the stress is laid on his peculiar way of dancing as all his movements are amplified and exaggerated. In Wright's film, the scene at Rosings, which conflates several scenes in the novel, illustrates the satirical intent of the book. Collins is first seen alone, bowing in front of Lady Catherine and her daughter. He is again filmed centre frame and isolated by the camera. He appears as totally out of tune with his black drab costume, lost in the vast room, surrounded by huge and colourful paintings of epic, mythological characters, which make him look even more dwarfish. Then the camera frames the group of male guests at Rosings and reveals Mr Collins's inability to understand the posture despite the "lightness of foot" which he boasts about during the ball at Netherfield. Collins's awkwardness is set into relief by the perfect mastery of the two gentlemen, Darcy and Fitzwilliam. Later in the scene, the group is seen at Pemberley as Darcy is framed standing in front of the pianoforte. Mr Collins stands with his two feet apart and firmly set on the floor. He then twists his body, contorting his knees, thighs, shoulders and neck in an effort to produce an ideal "serpentine" line advocated by Hogarth. The two gentlemen stand on one foot, in a state of delicate balance, their other leg and foot barely touching ground. As a result, as is pointed out by Raphaëlle

Costa de Beauregard,<sup>4</sup> it is Mr Collins who is comic, rather than the two men, though their very rigidity suggests careful breeding and artifice rather than a “naturally elegant” posture.

Another aspect of the satire that is conveyed in the films focuses on manners, and this concerns Collins as well as Lady Catherine. Mr Collins is obviously concerned about his own manners and speech, but by expressing satisfaction at his own performance, he unwittingly draws attention upon himself and becomes an easy target, as is illustrated in the filmic versions, especially in Wright’s. During the meal scene, Collins exposes his own hypocrisy, but also his total lack of awareness of what an ironical remark is. He takes for granted the compliments of Mr Bennet as to the unrehearsed, “natural” quality of his manners while the other protagonists and of course the spectators are fully made aware of the irony when he states: “Believe me, no one would suspect your manners to be rehearsed.” Mr Bennet and Lizzie, his favourite daughter, exchange looks of complicity and understanding. Elizabeth’s light smile is answered by a frank laugh off screen emanating from her sister Lydia who almost chokes. The film script takes up most of the textual dialogue. To Elizabeth’s question—“May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?”—Mr Collins, unaware of the satirical touch, answers: “They arise chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible,” thus unwittingly acknowledging his duplicity.

#### V- *Grotesqueness*

Grotesqueness implies a notion of distortion, exaggeration, incongruity, ridicule, both at the level of bodily attitudes and at that of the use of language. This device is used to characterize Collins and Lady Catherine. Different connotations are given to the character according to the various versions. The MGM film stresses Collins’s pomposity, stupidity, and clumsiness. The actor has the tall size and the physical heaviness of the textual Collins though he is not a clergyman but a librarian. This shift of status is probably due to censorship—the Hays code—, which did not allow such a negative vision of a man of the church. Collins appears as particularly ridiculous while he literally chases up Elizabeth, running after her throughout the garden party scene (an added scene) before being finally misdirected by Darcy who relieves Elizabeth of his undesired attention. The BBC version chooses to emphasize the physical roundness of the character and also stresses the hypocrisy which makes of him a Tartuffe-like character, with his constantly smiling, smirking face and his obsequious bowing. The Wright version chooses to foreground the very small size of Collins, thus comically accentuating the contrast with Darcy and even with Elizabeth, in the declaration scene, the discrepancy being all the more stressed as Collins

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<sup>4</sup> See: “Marble fauns in Joe Wright’s adaptation, or the new depths of Enlightenment,” *Pride and Prejudice*, L. Bury & D. Sipièrè, eds., *Ellipses*, September 2006.

falls on one knee. The first part of the scene is filmed in medium shot with the two characters side by side. The shot is still. However, when Collins, having listed his motivations, evokes the “violence of his affections,” Elizabeth herself reacts violently by standing up. Her swift movement is matched by a very abrupt shift of scale. She is filmed in close up and towers upon Collins. From then on, the editing alternates high angle shots on Collins and low angle shots on Lizzie, exacerbating the contrast. Moreover, the Wright version foregrounds a form of sexual repression that is already partly present in the BBC version with the ludicrous encounter of Collins with a half naked Lydia. The clergyman hides his face with his hand, trying to bypass Lydia’s body and his subsequent flight down the stairs is accompanied by the laughs and giggles of the sisters. This “prurient” aspect is amplified in the 2005 version through the peculiar expressiveness of the actor Tom Hollander, his probing eye in particular, and the various Freudian slips that reveal his obsession, especially when he refers to “intercourse” in a wrong context and apologizes for that slip of language (whose sexual connotation is also highlighted by Wright himself in the DVD bonus commentary). Another example is provided when he refers to his “small rectory” abutting Lady Catherine’s Rosings park. This emphasis on sex, an issue that is absent from the explicit discourse of the novel, is a means of modernizing the text and establishing a form of complicity between the film and the contemporary viewer.

A recurrent technique of characterization is reinforcement by analogy. This concerns main characters, Elizabeth and Darcy, but also applies conspicuously to Collins and Lady Catherine, especially in the Wright version. For example, Lady Catherine is associated with a peacock through her feathered hat, thus foregrounding her arrogance and pride. The caged parrots testify to the necessity of imitation. Collins is humorously associated with the parrot when he insists on Lizzie playing the piano. His voice is literally echoed by the parrot’s croak, while Elizabeth is attracted to the bird (the white one) because of its exotic character and beautifully coloured feathers. Collins is also comically associated with flowers. First, he is seen gazing at and plucking a white daisy during the Netherfield ball. While he is about to propose, he also gives Elizabeth a very small pink flower as a token of his love. This incongruous “romantic” offering seems quite out of tune with the character’s general attitude and it emphasizes his conventional, preconceived views. His attitude seems indeed dictated by clichés. This is also illustrated both in novel and film by the fact that Collins interprets Lizzie’s refusal in every conceivable way but the most obvious one, the fact she has no desire to marry him. He assumes that her modesty prevents her from accepting him on the spot, that she behaves like all “elegant females” or wishes to increase his passion by prolonging his suspense. This series of false justifications is taken up in Wright’s film, thus exemplifying the blindness and lack of sensitivity of the character.

Beyond obvious differences, there are indeed similarities between those two secondary yet conspicuous characters. Both are clearly cast as antagonistic to the main female protagonist, either in terms of rejection or appropriation. Both are manipulative and scheming. They share the same values and the same world outlook, despite the huge social gap that separates them. They assert the superiority of aristocracy and they



emphasize social hierarchy. Lady Catherine is an object of constant admiration, even veneration, for Collins, who is also heavily indebted to his patroness and her “condescension.” He follows the precepts of his benefactress almost to the letter, as he demonstrates with his courting of Elizabeth. Both also appear out of tune with their time. Collins is totally unaware of some rules of conduct and he lacks perceptiveness, because he plays blindly a part that has been cast for him, while he thinks himself clever and astute, even full of wit. His imitative, servile behaviour makes him indeed an easy target for irony. Lady Catherine lives in her glorious past, unaware of the social changes affecting society and incapable of contemplating even the possibility of her nephew’s alliance with a woman of inferior rank. She does not see that the dominion of her class is being threatened by the emerging bourgeoisie embodied by the Bingleys. This also explains why they are dealt with as grotesques.

However characterization varies according to the films. In the MGM version, Collins is mostly ridiculous and innocuous, a fool and a mere nuisance who is easily discarded, not to say victimized. Lady Catherine also verges on the comic grotesque. However she is highly theatrical and she is also ultimately redeemed by her final complicity with Darcy. This classic Hollywood version tones down conflicts and stresses happy endings. In the BBC version, the two characters feature more prominently, but the same scenes are highlighted. Collins is the prototypical hypocrite, playing upon ambivalent patterns of behaviour and moral codes. Lady Catherine is much less theatrical, but nonetheless patronizing and even contemptuous. Her pent up fury literally explodes in the final confrontation with Elizabeth. Joe Wright, with the complicity of Tom Hollander, chooses to develop a more complex and ambiguous version of Collins—arrogant and almost timid, predatory and pathetic—while his Lady Catherine (thanks to Judy Dench) provides the most impressive impersonation of the part, verging on the monstrous. Both characters are also contrasted with Darcy and act as foils to him. Collins is, to a certain extent, a “rival” for Darcy as intimated in the Netherfield ball scene, but he is also a grotesque caricature of the “lover.” Lady Catherine provides a negative image of aristocracy, unredeemed by feelings while Darcy, *in fine*, provides an idealized vision of a class fast losing power, but possibly still capable of confronting social and cultural changes.