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The Making of Jane Austen

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Playing Mr. Darcy before Laurence Olivier

Cross Dressing, Consuming Passion, and Cracking the Whip

From 1940 to 1995, the screen actor who *was* Darcy was Sir Laurence Olivier (1907–89). Viewers of a certain age might remember and appreciate David Rintoul's Darcy (1980), but Olivier's position was secure before the arrival of Colin Firth in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series (1995). Olivier, a star for whom words like "incomparable" seem inadequate, attracted the greatest critical acclaim for his Shakespearean stage roles. His best-known film roles include turns as Heathcliff in William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939) and as the brooding widower in Alfred Hitchcock's gothic thriller *Rebecca* (1940), with its *Jane Eyre*–esque plot. For many years, Olivier was the filmgoer's favorite broody, mysterious, tall-dark-and-handsome hero. Among Janeites, Olivier's Darcy may stand out as his most memorable role, despite the film's being largely derided today, except for his performance.

Even Colin Firth was at first intimidated by Olivier. Firth said that, once he learned from his brother that Darcy was "supposed to be sexy" and researched the role, he started to think, "Oh, God, Olivier was so fantastic and no one else could ever play the part."[1] Olivier famously hated the role of Darcy and the resulting film, but, like Firth after him, he couldn't escape his star turn as Austen's hero. In a book of autobiographical reminiscences written in his late seventies, Olivier wrote, "I'm still signing autographs over Darcy's large left lapel." Olivier modestly attributes that fact to MGM's sumptuous costumes, rather than to his own powers of attraction; he certainly didn't think the quality of the film accounted for it. He thought the film missed "the best points in the book."[2]

The dominance of Firth and Olivier in the pantheon makes it easy to forget that there were many three-dimensional Darcys prior to Olivier.[3] Most of those living, breathing Darcys played the character in front of live audi-

ences, on the stage. We saw in chapter 4 how the amateur theater had a previously unrecognized impact on Austen's legacy, particularly in amplifying the themes of women's independence and in celebrating admirable domestic protest. Dramatic versions of Elizabeth Bennet were reshaped by stand-alone scenes and amateur theatricals presented in the wake of increased educational opportunities for women, the New Woman, and the women's suffrage movement. But as Austen's novel came to the professional stage, her hero, too, took new shape. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, stage adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* shifted the focus of the reader-viewer away from envisioning the plot as centered on the admirable rebellion and growth of a witty, saucy heroine. Instead, these adaptations moved toward a focus on audience members' witnessing the heroine's gradual realization of what they'd seen all along: a sexy, misunderstood hero.

We often hear claims today about the groundbreaking nature of Colin Firth's sexualized portrayal of Darcy. Screenwriter Andrew Davies is credited with creating the first version of the character that presented him as perceptibly in touch with his manly desires.[4] Davies imagines himself as being able to "help" Austen with audiences by "writing such a pro-Darcy adaptation . . . If they saw him suffering or just doing something very physical, the audience would treat him more like a real person, and not just have Elizabeth's view."[5] But the history of stage Darcys shows that Austen's dramatic adapters were running with this idea long before Davies. Darcys on the professional stage date back to 1901, although at first in what Davies might call anti-Darcy adaptations. They were Darcys who spent much of the play acting in ways that reinforced Elizabeth's most uncharitable views of the character. In this chapter, we'll examine stage Darcys as they moved from pompous stiffs who turn out to be marriageable in end-of-play big reveals, to becoming lusting hotties roiling with passion throughout the action. These later Darcys were meant to be irresistible to everyone except Elizabeth, until she finally gives herself over to him, too.

In the early years of Austen on the stage, Darcy seems to have been a difficult stage part, both as the character was written by playwrights and as he was interpreted by individual actors. The first three-dimensional, professional actor Darcy was conceived for the stage by Rosina Filippi, the same innovator who published the first Austen adaptations for dramatic amateurs. Filippi wrote *The Bennets* (1901), staged as a special matinee at the Royal Court Theatre on March 1, 1901. She gave it the subtitle *A Play without a Plot*. The script doesn't appear to have survived, but both subtitle and published

reviews suggest it was not a stand-alone retelling of Austen's novel. It appears to have consisted of connected scenes that relied on an audience's familiarity with the novel. One reviewer dubs it "a play with a plot indifferently handled," although he credits the work with being "the most interesting" of the week's new shows in its novelty. He also concludes that the play was at least as "cheerful a meeting with old friends as is afforded by many inappropriate book illustrations," showing the extent to which the three media—novel, illustration, and play—were then seen as in conversation.[6]

The surviving program and reviews indicate that Filippi doubled as the cast's comic Mrs. Bennet. The play's codirectors, E. Harcourt Williams (1880–1957) and Winifred Mayo (née Winifred Monck-Mason; 1870–1967), doubled as its Darcy and Elizabeth. That the first professional *Pride and Prejudice* on stage was codirected by the actors who played Elizabeth and Darcy itself seems like a fairy-tale piece of literary and theater history.[7] That the play was written by the woman who played its Mrs. Bennet seems almost the stuff of fiction. (We've already heard about Filippi in chapter 4.) Her partners in the first professional stage Austen were just as intriguing. Mayo would later become a leader in the women's suffrage movement and take the stage *as* Jane Austen, as we'll see in chapter 9. Harcourt Williams, too, would later direct suffrage plays.[8] But much of the rest of the cast was drawn from the troupe with which Filippi had had a long association: F. R. Benson's company of Shakespearean players, now understood as a training ground for many of the era's most accomplished actors.

The Bennets' Darcy—the first professional stage Darcy—was often cast as a Romeo or an Othello. Harcourt Williams was one of the players "borrowed," as the program puts it, from Benson's troupe. His turn as Darcy was early on in his career, when he was an emerging talent in his early twenties. He eventually achieved renown as a character actor and London theater director. We can gather only a little about the sort of Darcy the play offered audiences, primarily from reviews. One reviewer describes *The Bennets*' Darcy as "becomingly superior," suggesting that he was not played as entirely unlikeable to the audience, even when Elizabeth dislikes him.[9] A later critic would dub Williams "one of the ideal younger heroes of the romantic drama."[10] Another describes him as "refreshingly youthful," with "grace and a pleasing personality."[11]

Not everyone embraced his Darcy, beloved actor though he may have been. Drama critic A. B. Walkley reports being extremely disappointed. He suggests that dramatizing Austen is a "ghastly crime," writing, "My own

Figure 5.1. Collage of Austen Actors, *clockwise from top left:* Rosina Filippi, undated photograph; E. Harcourt Williams, undated postcard; Winifred Mayo, undated postcard (permission of Aurora Metro Press); Ben Webster, undated postcard.

private pleasure in the book is marred by associations with the real and contemporary. I have, like all readers, my own ideas of Darcy and Elizabeth; I have lived with them for years, and return to them year by year. Henceforth I shall always be bothered by recollections of Mr. So-and-So at the Court Theatre, representing Mr. Darcy as if he were Mr. Martin Harvey."[12] Another reviewer, too, thought Williams's Darcy "curiously alike in voice and manner" to Martin-Harvey, finding the performance "to the end" "rather incomprehensible."[13]

The likening of Harcourt Williams's Darcy to the style of a fellow actor is worth untangling. The man who became Sir John Martin-Harvey (1863–1944) was best known for starring as Sydney Carton in an 1899 adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. Martin-Harvey's climb to the guillotine was said to have made women in the theater audience openly weep. He specialized in "costumed romance and melodrama," which hints at the kind of mannered, larger-than-life, pathetic Darcy that Harcourt Williams may have brought to the part.[14] Apparently, however, Williams could not pull off Martin-Harvey's version of winningly, tear-inducingly somber. One review judged that Williams's Darcy lacked dignity.[15]

It's impossible to know what precise embellishments Filippi brought to Darcy in her script, so we shouldn't blame only Williams's acting for any perceived deficiencies. Other actors came in for greater praise in the reviews. Filippi herself is much admired, as vivacious and delightful. The actor who played Mr. Collins, Lyall Swete (1865–1930), is lauded for his comic relief, and the *Saturday Review* focuses its review of the play around him.[16] Mayo was not so universally approved. The *Times* reviewer complains that her Elizabeth Bennet is too pert and petulant.[17] The *Athenaeum* declares her "not quite an ideal Elizabeth" but "destitute neither of humour nor charm." It finds the play as a whole "open . . . to the charge of amateurishness" but still "an agreeable and moderately refreshing entertainment" (443). With these mixed reviews, it's no surprise that this is the play's only known performance.

Perhaps because of its lackluster showing, Filippi's professionally staged Austen adaptation did not immediately spawn massive numbers of imitators, as had her amateur dramatizations. Over the course of the next two decades after 1901, only a trickle of professional-actor Darcys followed Harcourt Williams to the stage. But there were *amateur* actors playing Darcy, a few of whom may be identified from surviving records. At an elite American women's institution, Wellesley College, a student and alumni production of *Pride and Prejudice* was mounted in 1899. The corporate authorship of the play by the women of the Zeta Alpha Society, a literary society at Wellesley, seems implied. Theirs was a five-act version, in which Darcy was performed by alumna Miss Willis, class of '96. Her performance is described as having been "especially artistic and finished" in a difficult role.[18] A photo survives of the cast, although it's not clear which of the two crossed-dressed swains is Willis's Darcy.[19] It's possible that the first—certainly one of the first—identifiable amateur-actor Darcys was a woman.

Figure 5.2. Photograph, "A Scene from Pride and Prejudice as Dramatized and Performed at Wellesley," in "Drama at the Women's Colleges," *Puritan* 8, no. 2 (May 1900): 155. Courtesy of University of Michigan Libraries.

We have no clear sense of what kind of Darcy the women of Zeta Alpha Society decided to put on their stage. Several years later, Mary Keith Medbery (Mrs. Steele) MacKaye published a four-act play, *Pride and Prejudice* (1906). It became the first full-length version of the novel to reach print, providing us with a text to study the ways that Austen's hero was likely staged. (Filippi's *Duologues* did not include a Darcy.) MacKaye knew the theater and theatrical life. Her husband, Steele MacKaye, was a famed playwright and theatrical inventor, the man who patented the folding theater chair.[20] The MacKaye men are well-known figures in Shakespearean theater history; the MacKaye women deserve to be better known, especially among those who care about Jane Austen.[21] Despite the fact that MacKaye's Darcy gets first billing in her list of characters, her "Fitzgerald Darcy," as he is renamed, is not a major presence in the script. He bursts out from time to time in speeches featuring exclamation points.[22] As one reviewer put it, MacKaye's Elizabeth is the play's "bewitching" character, both "a stimulating

yet mollifying cohesive force."[23] Perhaps that's because MacKaye's Darcy demanded mollifying.

MacKaye's Darcy is most unusual in his second proposal scene, for which he arrives to the Bennet home with a whip in his hand. He carries it with him in his conversation with Elizabeth, occasionally banging it against his knees in anger. He cracks the whip when Elizabeth tells him that it was his aunt, Lady Catherine, who revealed that Darcy helped Lydia secure a marriage to Wickham. (This is obviously an important deviation from the original novel, in which it is Lydia who inadvertently lets that fact slip.) After he cracks his whip, Darcy utters a "Damn!" (MacKaye 164) and exclaims furiously to Elizabeth that he will "settle matters" with Lady Catherine and that "*she* shall be set right, I assure you" (166). This scene shows, among other things, that the Heathcliffing and Brontëization of Austen is not a recent invention.[24] But MacKaye's Darcy is only briefly explosive, as mysteriously violent behavior doesn't dominate his character in the play.

Instead, MacKaye offers audiences a profoundly Elizabeth-centric version of the story. The following dialogue makes clear who holds the power:

> DARCY: I really am not the pretentious prig I must have seemed to you. I wish you could forgive my abominable pride.
>
> ELIZABETH (*Looking at him with a half smile*): I will, on one condition.
>
> DARCY: Name it.
>
> ELIZABETH: That you forget my unwarrantable prejudice.
>
> DARCY: Oh, Miss Bennet! (*He goes impetuously forward—then restraining himself, smiles and looks down on her.*) I really think, after all, I shall have to be grateful to my aunt. She has done us an enormous service.
>
> ELIZABETH (*Smiling still more*): Well, Lady Catherine loves to be useful! (167)

MacKaye's Elizabeth has all of the play's best lines. The action may end with Darcy holding Elizabeth in his arms, but he's the one who careens emotionally between "faltering" and "furious," until she in the end changes her mind about him, as does the audience, through her eyes (166).

MacKaye's play became immensely popular. One 1916 catalogue describes MacKaye's play as "widely used by colleges and schools," primarily in the United States.[25] Performances are difficult to trace, but records survive of some notable features, including, again, some all-female casts. The script calls for ten women and ten men, but there are records of twenty-woman productions. A copy of MacKaye's *Pride and Prejudice* in my own collection of Austeniana pencils into the margins identifiably female names next to the male

parts on its list of characters. In 1907, Mr. Darcy was played by a University of Michigan senior named Lulu Liesemer.[26] The Lulu Liesemer Darcys—these hundreds of actor-Darcys, female and male—may now be untraceable, but they, too, played a signal part in establishing Austen's legacy and popular reception. First, they ensured Austen's continued relevance and cultural reach fully as much as—and perhaps more than—the dramatically skeptical Austen-loving literati. Second, these actors gave audiences performances that offered more than a comic crash-course to marriage. All-female casts may have made it possible to put the story on stage as a vehicle for exploring relationships of all kinds. That casting made for a dramatic story about power, control, and self-determination, taking *Pride and Prejudice* beyond the interpretive confines of heteronormative romance.

The next full-length *Pride and Prejudice* dramatization recorded in Gilson's *Bibliography of Jane Austen* is a Marathi-language text published in India in 1913. Gilson describes *Vichar-vilasit*, by Gopal Chiminaji Bhate, as an Austen dramatization. That text is presently untraceable, but its title is similar to one given to a Marathi *Hamlet* translation.[27] A previously unrecorded *Pride and Prejudice*–based text was published in Marathi in that year. It is not, however, a dramatization: Kr̥shṇājī Keśava Gokhale's *Ājapāsūna Pannāsa Varshānnĩ Āṅgla Kādambarīkartrī "Jena Ôsṭina" Yāñcyā "Prāiḍa ênḍa Prejuḍisa" Yā Kādambarīcẽ Rūpāntara* (1913). Gokhale was a Kokanasth Brahmin who, after his education, took service in Jath State, became a judge, and ultimately served as the divan (or dewan) of Jath.[28] His title roughly translates to *Fifty Years from Today: A Conversion of "Pride and Prejudice," by English Novelist Jane Austen*. His text does away with the character of Kitty Bennet and renames Lydia as Sundari. His preface describes a hope that Austen's scenario will apply to Indian society fifty years in the future.[29] Gokhale's conversion or adaptation of Austen would no doubt be interesting to study in conversation with Gurinder Chadha's Bollywood-style film of a century later, *Bride and Prejudice* (2004).

There was a professional stage lull for new Austen dramatizations after Harcourt Williams in Filippi's *The Bennets* (1901). The next recorded professional-actor Darcy, twenty years on, was the highest-profile performance yet. He took the stage before Her Majesty the Queen. This *Pride and Prejudice* dramatization, too, had a connection to women's education and progressive women. It was staged as a benefit for the Bedford College for Women in London, with one matinee performance at the Palace Theatre on March 24, 1922. The performance drew a very large audience, including

Bedford's patron, Queen Mary, consort to King George V. The play was coauthored by husband and wife Eileen and J. C. Squire. Eileen Squire (1884–1970) was a writer who had published novels under her maiden name, Eileen Harriet Anstruther. Poet and editor J. C. Squire (1884–1958) may be best known for his one-liner, "I am not so think as you drunk I am."[30] The Squires' play, as it was first performed, featured among its cast the seventy-five-year-old actor-luminary Ellen Terry (1847–1928). This was one of her last roles. The play was produced by Terry's daughter, Edith Craig (1869–1947). (More discussion of Terry, Craig, and their significant involvement in staging Jane Austen is found in chapter 9 of this book.)

The Squires' *Pride and Prejudice* was not published until 1929, seven years after its production.[31] From that print edition, we learn more about the Squires' Darcy. He appears to have been almost a comic character, the butt of Elizabeth's jokes, given stage directions that involve standing silently and looking around the stage through his eyeglass (Squire and Squire 20), delivering his lines "*solemnly*" (22), "*gravely*" (37), and "*firmly*" (58), as well as "*smiling superciliously*" (23), and "*smiling at last*" (38). He must have been broadly drawn and noticeably stiff, because at one point, behind his back, Elizabeth is given directions to imitate him walking (31). When, during his second proposal, the Squires' Darcy is directed to kiss Elizabeth's hand and then to embrace her, sitting down next to her and putting an arm around her, he concludes by saying "*softly*," "My dearest and loveliest Elizabeth" (114). Elizabeth is characterized by wit and energy, as Darcy changes from a haughty stiff to a conquered stiff. The Squires' version also lumps all three suitors together in the end, having them deliver the play's penultimate line in unison, addressing themselves to Mr. Bennet with a robotic, "Oh, thank'ye, sir" (120). Elizabeth not only gets all of the play's best lines but most of its vigorous physical movements.

The Squires' Darcy proves a milestone in another way. In the 1922 performance, he was played by famed actor Ben Webster (1864–1947), who was then fifty-seven years old. Webster was an unusually aged Darcy by our standards. So, too, was his Elizabeth Bennet, played by Mary Jerrold (1877–1955), who was a surprising forty-four years old. Webster's real-life wife, Dame May Whitty (1865–1948), was cast as the play's Mrs. Bennet.[32] A Darcy and a Mrs. Bennet married to each other offstage is definitely something new in the history of Austen. (It makes offscreen couple Elinor [Emma Thompson] and Willoughby [Greg Wise] from Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* [1995] seem

practically ho-hum.) The play's positive reviews, which name Filippi as a precursor to the Squires, don't mention the actors' ages. It would seem that their ages didn't bother anyone: the Squires' version of the hero, at any age—with his ogling eyeglass and stiff walk—could not have been staged with the primary intention of making audience members drool over him.

For some few years longer, minimizing Darcy's role and appeal onstage continued, even as dramatic treatments of the novel became more frequent. Anne Johnson-Jones's *Pride and Prejudice* (1930), for example, is very buttoned down. Recycling much of its dialogue from Austen's original, Johnson-Jones also strings it together in an exceptionally clipped, cool way. The character of Lady Catherine de Bourgh is entirely dispensed with, and Elizabeth is given the play's last word, as Darcy takes her hand. Critic Andrew Wright notes of this version, "It is regrettable that in the play as a whole there is very little Darcy."[33] But the phenomenon was by then a common dramatic approach. Perhaps playwrights imagined that by making him, or the Elizabeth-Darcy romance, more central, they would move too much of the story away from the guiding perspective of Elizabeth. The intention of these early playwrights seems to have been to put the audience in the same emotional boat as Elizabeth. The play would communicate her skewed view of the hero and then overturn it at play's end. In these plays, the heroine and the audience simultaneously realize that they've been mistaken in Darcy, recognizing that he is both lovable and marriageable. Elizabeth was presented as the most valuable part of the story on the stage.

That changed in 1935, when *Pride and Prejudice* came to Broadway. Helen Jerome's play became a New York hit, running for 219 performances.[34] The following year, it traveled to London's West End, where it enjoyed 317 more.[35] It toured thereafter. Jerome's play had come close to being staged earlier in the 1930s. It was first optioned by a producer who hoped to use it as a stage vehicle for Katharine Hepburn. When Hepburn proved unavailable, Jerome's play was picked up by another producer, the legendary Max Gordon. It was said that Gordon had "the backing of certain motion picture interests, which served reasonably to strengthen his normally gambling instincts."[36] Hollywood was then on the lookout for literary classics and stage hits to take to the screen. The success of Jerome's *Pride and Prejudice* was at least in part a case of right author, right novel, right play, right time. When seen in those terms, the play may appear to be an almost accidental success. But its popularity—and the enduring cultural presence of some changes Jerome made to the

original—proves that she pushed just the right buttons, too. Her sexy Mr. Darcy reshapes audiences' sense of the character's proper role in dramatic versions of the story, moving him into new territory. (Jerome's innovation of a weepy Elizabeth was less successful and had little staying power.)

Helen Jerome (1883–1966), like Rosina Filippi before her, may seem an unlikely pioneer of dramatized Austen. Unlike Filippi, Jerome doesn't seem to have had much theater experience. Her previously published writings had attracted little notice, yet somehow she put her finger on the pulse of the cosmopolitan theatergoing public, becoming "the unexpected playwright success of the year."[37] Jerome reinvented Austen's story to appeal to contemporary tastes and, especially, desires. Reinvention was part of her own life experience. Raised in a large Irish Catholic family living in Australia, the former Nellie Bruton married young. Her husband, Armand Jerome, appears to have been in the mold of a Wickham. One account from the 1890s refers to his "bursting upon Sydney like a brilliant meteor."[38] He became a publisher, threw lavish suppers and picnics, and claimed to be a relative of English writer Jerome K. Jerome.[39] Whatever his ancestry, Armand Jerome turned out to be a con artist and a convicted forger. He married Nellie Bruton not long after having been released from prison.[40] It seems they first met when he served as poetry editor to young Helen (then still Nellie) when she was in her early teens. They had one daughter.[41] Armand Jerome became a music promoter and faced a bankruptcy.

Later in her life, Helen Jerome was described as "demurely wise, distractingly petite" although, when angry, someone who "towers like a monolith."[42] In the 1920s, her con-artist husband dead, Jerome published a treatise on sex questions, a novel, and more verse.[43] She immigrated to the United States. Then her *Pride and Prejudice* debuted. By 1936, she had a new identity. *Vogue* described her as "white-haired, English born, and married to George Ali."[44] After her *Pride and Prejudice*, she would go on to write a dramatization of *Jane Eyre* (1937), subtitled *A Drama of Passion in Three Acts*.[45] That play was no hit, but staging classic literature with contemporary passion became Jerome's most successful venture. Her Austen play was subtitled *A Sentimental Comedy in Three Acts*, with "sentimental" being an adjective more appropriate to Jerome's Elizabeth than to her steamy Darcy.[46]

Thanks to producer Gordon and his Hollywood interests, Jerome's play was mounted on a scale unlike any previous Austen production. It was the first *Pride and Prejudice* to use serious set designs, props and costumes. It

also featured more amusing dialogue for all of its characters than had previous plays. Even Jane, Charlotte, and Darcy are each given their own zingers. (The play does away with Kitty and Mary.) Jerome's biting, memorable line, cattily delivered by Lady Lucas to Mrs. Bennet, that some men prefer women to have character over looks, made it into the 1940 Metro Goldwyn Mayer film. Jerome liberally used nonverbal embellishments, too. Her Darcy and Elizabeth do a great deal of eyebrow raising to communicate mutual disdain (18–19).

Reading Jerome's play alongside the Austen dramatizations that came before it, rather than against the original novel, better reveals its novelty.[47] There are a few holdover elements from Old Stage Darcy in Jerome's play. For instance, Jerome's Darcy is frequently directed to act bored. When Darcy declares Elizabeth tolerable, the directions say he is to do so indifferently, while examining his fingernails (Jerome 49). When Miss Bingley declares Elizabeth to be ill bred, Darcy again examines his fingernails (59). The overly jocular Colonel Fitzwilliam, in defending Darcy to Elizabeth, dubs him "old sobersides" and the "old solemn owl" (127). These lines were designed for laughs, but there is seriousness, too, as the Colonel excuses Darcy's snobbery and faults as arising from his nursemaids, governesses, and impossible mother (128, 129). So far, so similar to many earlier staged versions of Darcy.

The changes are most evident in Darcy's approach to Elizabeth. When Jerome's Darcy comes for Elizabeth in his first proposal, he comes on strong and physically. He approaches her and stands close; he holds out his hands. He paces. He delivers his lines "*slowly and passionately*." He refers to "this love for you that consumes me." He declares, "*white with emotion*," "Elizabeth, I love you" (Jerome 132). But then we're told, after she objects to his manner of proposing, he speaks to her "*as one would tell a child [about] something astonishing*" (133), a response that more than excuses her rebuff. Stage directions describe him as being filled with "*hidden yearning*," "*hurt for the first time in his life*" (135). When he leaves the stage, Elizabeth sheds tears (138), something she does in Jerome's version with cloying frequency.

In the second proposal scene, Elizabeth is directed twice to tremble, and Darcy twice to deliver lines humbly, as well as "*passionately*" (Jerome 190). Elizabeth declares to him, with a bowed head, "I am abased" (192). As they come closer and closer to each other physically, Elizabeth again cries. Darcy delivers the last lines of the play:

DARCY: Dare I ask you . . . again?

ELIZABETH (*Smiles up at him through her tears*): My father says you are the sort of gentleman whom one would not dare refuse anything he condescended to ask.

DARCY (*Moved to his depths. Takes her in his arms*): My cruel . . . my kind . . . oh, my lovely Elizabeth! (*Folds her close, his lips on hers*)

CURTAIN (193)[48]

The play was by no means ahead of its time in terms of its gender politics, as Filippi's *Duologues* had been. Jerome's play reinforced traditional gender roles, doing more to shame the heroine and put her in her place than Austen's original did. (Can you imagine Austen's having her Elizabeth bow her head and declare herself abased, not to mention all of that crying?)

Staged *Pride and Prejudice* had long been recycling the same dramatic patterns. Most plays featured rebellious Elizabeths, cardboard Darcys, and lifeless interactions between them. Jerome transformed all of these, the latter two with success. Augmenting parts of the original text where desires might be located between the lines, and keeping parts of Austen's story intact, Jerome changed the potential for immediate sympathy with hero *and* heroine. Audiences did not spend several hours imagining a powerful man as a distant enemy only to decide they were wrong. Instead, they were encouraged to empathize with Darcy's thwarted desires and to enjoy watching them be fulfilled, as he slowly conquered Elizabeth's high standards with his worthy, palpable passion. But witnessing his desires and struggle to control his now-readable, laudable attraction also had the effect of making Elizabeth's rejection of him seem less sensible. Jerome had crafted a story about Elizabeth's awakening to her own desires, propelled forward by Darcy's long-perceivable feelings for her. Perhaps this shift is what led Jerome to make her witty Elizabeth noticeably weakened and weepy. Elizabeth's abasing herself before Darcy makes more sense when she is as emotionally volatile as he is.

Jerome's Darcy, then, required an actor who could carry the production, not tread around the stage as a caricature of tall, dark, and distant. The directors cast several men who tried to carry the piece, some apparently more successfully than others. When Jerome's play began to tour in the late 1930s, it would end up featuring many different actors playing Darcy. But the first one, in New York, was Colin Keith-Johnston (1896–1980), an Englishman of nearly forty. Keith-Johnston was best known for his Shakespearean characters, especially his avant-garde modern-dress Hamlet, played as rebellious,

snarling, cigarette smoking, and violent. Photographs of Keith-Johnston as Darcy suggest an actor sensual and dashing—absolutely Olivier's equal in projecting sex appeal. When he leans in to Elizabeth (Adrianne Allen [1907–93]), he strikes a pose that shows he finds her far more than "tolerable." In one promotional still, Keith-Johnston's Darcy seems to be sniffing Allen's Elizabeth. Reviewers understood the change. As one put it, "Both the play and the performance are said to scotch the old libel that Elizabeth was strong in her resentment of Mr. Darcy's arrogance until she saw the splendours of Pemberley."[49] Playwright Jerome must have shared the critical view that Austen's Elizabeth would have taken Darcy "as willingly without Pemberley as with it."[50]

Keith-Johnston traveled the United States with the touring production for a time, which means he did not serve as the West End Darcy. When

Figure 5.3. Photograph, Colin Keith-Johnston and Adrianne Allen. Publicity still from *Pride and Prejudice* (New York, 1935).

Jerome's *Pride and Prejudice* opened in London, it was with Hugh Williams (1904–69) as Darcy and Celia Johnson (1908–82) as Elizabeth. Williams was significantly younger than Keith Johnston, not quite thirty, but he was already an international stage and screen star. Despite the play's longer run in London than in New York, British reviewers were on the whole less glowing about Williams's Darcy and about the play. This is perhaps because London's theater critics expressed greater attachment to the fidelity model of adaptation or because they were more conversant with the original novel. Either way, they were not as pleased with Jerome's deviations from the original as were American critics. The *Observer*'s reviewer declares the play "potted Austen." The review acknowledges that Williams as Darcy "triumphantly holds our interest," yet saves its greater praise for Johnson's Elizabeth.[51] In general, British critics seemed to want to hold on longer than American ones to the centrality of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* stage adaptations. (A. A. Milne's ill-timed play, completed just as Jerome's appeared, shows this with its very title, *Miss Elizabeth Bennet* [1936]. His play's focus remains squarely on the heroine.) But audiences internationally would soon come around to a *Pride and Prejudice* driven by Darcy's desires.

Did Laurence Olivier crib some of his Darcy from Colin Keith-Johnston or Hugh Williams, from Jerome's steamy stage Darcy, whether consciously or not? It's hard to imagine otherwise. Reviewers who liked Jerome's play—and most found things to like—express surprise at its being so like "a comedy of to-day," calling it "a play that pranks deliciously," "beguiling," and a "love-duel."[52] After Jerome's Keith-Johnston, the character of Darcy would emerge as the visual and emotional center of most *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations. His portrayal drove the play away from the blueprint of stand-alone, refusing Elizabeths prevalent in the earlier twentieth century. The new Darcy made the story so unmistakably about heterosexuality that female Darcys would become straight-out unthinkable. Thanks to Jerome's Darcy and those who played him, the hero of *Pride and Prejudice* became irresistible eye-candy for female audiences. It's a position the character holds on stage and screen to this day. Olivier might be credited with many things—and so might screenwriter Andrew Davies and Colin Firth—but inventing sexy Darcy is not one of them. For that, we must turn to the history of Austen on the stage, especially to the literary woman who seems to have lived her own life more in the mold of a Lydia than an Elizabeth Bennet: playwright Helen Jerome.