

Jane Austen and a Family Elopement

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“The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this.”¹ Thus did Mr. Collins write to Mr. Bennet on hearing the news of Lydia Bennet’s elopement with George Wickham. Whether Jane Austen’s attitude towards elopement was ever put to the test in real life is uncertain. As far as I know there is no well-documented event of this kind in her experience, but an elopement in the Austen family nine years after Jane’s death contained all the ingredients of high drama and in *Pride and Prejudice* she portrays attitudes which have some similarity to those found in the family crisis of 1826.

In the reaction of the Bennet family, whose views are in contrast to those of Mr. Collins, she shows where her sympathies lie. Mr. Collins’s advice to his kinsman, Mr. Bennet, is to “throw off your unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence” (297). In a further letter he comments: “You ought certainly to forgive them, as a christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing.” This is too much for Mr. Bennet who explodes with incredulity: “*That* is his notion of christian forgiveness!” (364). The author’s sentiments are definitely not with Mr. Collins.

In 1820 Jane’s favourite niece, Fanny Knight, married Sir Edward Knatchbull, a widower twelve years older whose children included a daughter, Mary Dorothea, who became the participant in a love match of melodramatic proportions. It was Fanny’s own brother, Edward, who in 1825 proposed to Mary Dorothea, then nineteen years old. Unhappily her high-principled father, Sir Edward, gave a “decided negative” to the request for his daughter’s hand, thus causing “great discomfort between the families” (the Knights and Knatchbulls).² In consequence the couple decided to take matters into their own hands and on 13 May, Mary left the Knatchbulls’ London house in the middle of the night and went with Edward to Gretna Green—the village just across the border in Scotland where (until 1856) the law permitted instant marriage without licence, banns or priest. The following week they returned to Hampshire where Fanny’s clergyman brother William, accepting the *fait accompli*, subsequently married them in St. Nicholas Church at Steventon, of which he was rector.

For the Knights and Knatchbulls the event was undoubtedly a controversial issue. Sir Edward’s reaction (like Mr. Collins’s) was extreme, he refused to accept his daughter for many years; “it was as much or more than he could bear to hear her name mentioned and to see her would kill him,” wrote his son.³ Fanny (like the Bennet family) was full of sympathy for the couple and wrote, “Oh! that my dear husband would suffer christian feelings to influence him!”⁴ Family sources claim that Cassandra soon welcomed the couple

back into the family fold.⁵ The suggestion that resentment persisted between Fanny and her aunt is not borne out by Fanny's diary record.

How would Jane have viewed the episode? Would she, like Mr. Collins, have seen it as "so severe a misfortune?" (296). Much would have depended upon her opinions of the two young people. Mary Dorothea she never knew, but Fanny's love and respect for her step-daughter would have been a strong recommendation. There is little in Mary's background to suggest she was flighty and irresponsible, though naïve she may have been. Young Edward Knight had apparently made a poor impression upon Sir Edward, but it is hard to see any obvious objections, for Knight was neither young nor a fortune-hunter, being thirty-two and heir to substantial property. Aunt Jane, by contrast, had written well of her nephew. In 1813 she called him "a very promising and pleasing young Man" who "behaves with great propriety to his Father & great kindness to his Brothers & Sisters."⁶ It is probably fair to conclude that Jane would not have felt, like Mr. Collins, that approval of the elopement was an "encouragement of vice" (364).

Edward Knight and Mary Dorothea Knatchbull had true love in their relationship which led to a happy marriage; even Sir Edward was reconciled with his daughter in 1837. Jane once said to Fanny: "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection."⁷ Had she been living in 1826 she would surely have given her support to the eloping couple and behaved in much the same way as her sister and favourite niece had done.

NOTES

- ¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1952) pp. 296-97. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ² Fanny Knight's diaries are deposited in the Centre for Kentish Studies (CKS), Maidstone, and are reproduced by permission of the Knatchbull Family Archives. The catalogue reference is U951 F25/23, 1826.
- ³ CKS U951 C25/7, Letter from Norton Knatchbull to Mary Watts Russell, 23 July 1830.
- ⁴ CKS U951 F25/23, 19 May 1826.
- ⁵ MS. Family History by Fanny C. Lefroy, as quoted in Park Honan's *Jane Austen. Her Life*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987) p. 117.
- ⁶ Letter no. 85 from Jane to Francis Austen, 25 September 1813, from *Jane Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952). Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.
- ⁷ Letter no. 103 from Jane to Fanny, 18 November 1814.