

An Old Daytime Serial Writer Looks at *P&P*

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Jane Austen had a real potential as a daytime serial writer. I refer of course to *radio* serials, the original and only true form of the art, fifteen minutes a day, five days a week. The television versions of the medium have gone bonkers. With their bloated time spans and vicious characters they seem intent on exploiting every sexual excess and deviation known to psychiatry. It was far different in the heyday of radio, extending from about 1934 to 1950, when competition flourished among some thirty daytime serials—also known as Soap Operas, or Soaps, but *never* by anyone in the trade.

As in Jane Austen's novels, the people of radio daytime inhabited small towns suitably named Five Oaks or River's Bend. Class distinctions were perhaps not as sharp as in her period but they were there nonetheless; there was a right side of the tracks and a wrong. Yet the communities as a whole got on well together. Occasionally there might be a closet drunk or a philandering husband to cause humiliation or distress. But trouble, real trouble, the kind that brought heartache, pain and suffering—the mother's milk of daytime—always came from the outside. It arrived in the form of strangers with errant personalities or devious designs that upset the equilibrium of the town.

Since Jane Austen used exactly the same technique to stir the action of her plots she would have felt right at home in the medium. Had she been born a hundred-plus years later there is no reason why, with a little sharpening of her skills, she shouldn't have taken her place among the leading authors of the craft, the people who brought you *The Right to Happiness*, *Ma Perkins*, and *Our Gal Sunday*.

Let's examine *Pride and Prejudice* to see how Miss Austen might have restructured it for the more sophisticated demands of a daytime serial.

She starts off with a flourish. Instead of wasting time establishing the residents of Meryton, she plunges right into the arrival of strangers—the Bingley party at Netherfield—thus setting up the immediate prospect of trouble. In no time at all, she has the beautiful Jane Bennet and the engaging Mr. Bingley falling in love and has developed a feud between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, the haughty squire from Derbyshire. Meanwhile, in deft scenes, she has “tucked in” what we need to know about the locals—the Lucases, the Phillipses and the Bennet family, father, mother and the three remaining daughters.

We must admire the ingenuity with which Miss Austen spins her story along. Mrs. Bennet's stratagem in sending Jane to Netherfield on a rainy day when she is sure to catch cold is a shrewd daytime device. And the subsequent need for Elizabeth to follow as a nurse allows a sharper focus on the Elizabeth-Darcy feud while revealing the ploys and gambits of the jealous Miss Bingley, a true second-banana heavy if ever there was one.

Not content with this rich tapestry, Jane Austen, with generous abandon, weaves in two more strangers—Mr. Wickham and Mr. Collins. Wickham has an immediate function in confirming Elizabeth's prejudices against Darcy, but Mr. Collins is strictly for laughs. Comic characters were rare enough in daytime to be much appreciated.

With all this going for her—lyrical love, romantic feuding, chuckles galore in a story sequence worth at least six months of air time—we can imagine Jane Austen's serial rising to the top of the rating heap, outdistancing even *Big Sister* and *Life Can Be Beautiful*.

Then suddenly she comes to a dead stop. Her material evaporates. With little or no warning the characters that have driven her story disappear. The Netherfield party leaves for London, Wickham is off with his regiment to Brighton, Mr. Collins marries Charlotte Lucas and returns to his parsonage at Hunsford. Miss Austen has committed the very worst blunder of daytime; she has terminated one sequence without segueing smoothly into the next. Her inexperience in the medium is glaringly revealed.

She tries desperately to keep things going by tearful scenes between Jane and Elizabeth over Mr. Bingley's desertion and even sends Jane to London in fruitless pursuit of that weak-willed young man. But this is what was known in the trade as "stitching." It's no substitute for ongoing dynamic action. We can imagine the ratings slip, especially if *Road of Life* or *Second Husband* has a lingering death scene or a threatened bigamy in the works.

Slowly, painfully, Jane Austen pulls herself out of the doldrums. With Elizabeth's visit to the Collins's and the introduction of Lady Catherine de Bourgh she's back in full sail again. The chatelaine of Rosings is a prime daytime character, a type of outrageous personality that audiences loved to hate. Better yet, Darcy reappears and the suspended feud mounts in tension, culminating in Darcy's violent proposal of marriage.

But here again criticism is in order. Darcy's ungracious offer comes as too much of a shock; the audience is unprepared for it. A cardinal rule of daytime was that listeners must be ahead of the characters. A big scene must be anticipated in order to be savored properly. With more savvy of the medium Jane Austen would have understood this. Better far had she concocted a scene wherein Darcy left Rosings in an emotional turmoil on the night that Elizabeth failed to show up for dinner. With that treatment—the scene to be played on a Friday, of course, to insure a big audience for Monday—the listeners would have *known* that there were to be fireworks at the Collins's cottage instead of being totally surprised by them.

Again criticism must be applied to the proposal sequence itself. As Miss Austen has written it, the exchange between the principals is comparatively brief with the main points of difference and explanation covered in Darcy's subsequent letter. This is all wrong for daytime. Every aspect of the protagonists' misunderstandings should have been played out in direct dialogue, days, even weeks of it. At the end the characters would have been wrung dry by exhaustion. Still unreconciled, of course; still

standing on pride and prejudice as Miss Austen has them. But what a difference in the exploration of hearts and minds the sheer power of talk would have made.

We may now turn from carping to praise. Jane Austen, perhaps having learned from her previous boner, loses no time in getting her next sequence under way. Elizabeth's trip to the Lake District with her Gardiner relatives has been astutely "planted" in advance. However, there is a serious lapse in daytime dramaturgy in respect to her sister Lydia. We are made aware of the hazards of the wild young teenager's visit to the militia camp in Brighton but we are never shown her in actual contact with the dashing officers. Good technique would suggest a series of split scenes here. Part of each episode would be devoted to Lydia making hay among the redcoats, with particular emphasis on her developing intrigue with Wickham. The other segment would cover Elizabeth's tour through Derbyshire, ending up with the visit to Pemberley and the reappearance of the chastened Mr. Darcy. The purpose, of course, would be to prepare the audience for the shock of Lydia's elopement. In daytime, main characters could and should be stunned by the turn of events but the audience *never*.

The search for Lydia again cries out for split scene treatment. The activities of Messrs. Bennet, Gardiner and Darcy in London could have alternated with cameos of despair at Longbourn. It would have done the story no harm to depict Darcy actively engaged in the search. The important point was to conceal the knowledge from Elizabeth. And that, as in the novel, would have seemed guaranteed by the oath of secrecy extracted from the Gardiners by the high minded laird.

Remaining quibbles are along familiar lines. Lady Catherine's visit to Longbourn was not prepared for, as so easily could have been done by a prior scene with the bumbling Mr. Collins. And what can we say about the omitted confrontation between that irate lady and Darcy regarding his intentions toward Elizabeth? A criminal waste of grade-A material. We can only excuse Jane Austen for these lost opportunities on the grounds that she was merely a forerunner of the daytime art and not an experienced practitioner. She had not yet learned to squeeze emotion out of every crack and cranny of a charged situation.

Of course the ultimate catastrophe from a serial point of view was to bring *Pride and Prejudice* to a final and happy ending after no more than perhaps three years on the air. In daytime there could be no final and happy endings short of a cancellation. Only a joyous pause was permitted before trouble began again.

On the whole Jane Austen might have done better to start her serial career with *Emma*. Now there was a heroine with the true stuff of daytime in her. Even after marriage she would have continued to interfere in other people's lives—always with the best of intentions but always with disastrous results.