

IS IT REALLY LOVE THAT COUNTS?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a writer of romantic fiction must be in want of a source of inspiration- and since 2013 is the 200th anniversary year of the publication of “Pride and Prejudice”, Jane Austen’s celebrated and much loved romantic novel, it is not surprising that theories regarding the identity of Jane’s male Muse are, this year, being advanced with enthusiasm. But the man who inspired the writer to conjure up that most archly passionate of romantic heroes, Mr. Darcy, has been a source of conjecture since the publication of the book.

So, who is the most likely candidate for the honour of being identified as the real Darcy? Amongst the notes in the Cambridge University Press edition of “Pride and Prejudice”, one discovers a reference to the fact that, in December 1795, when Jane was twenty, she had “a flirtation during the Christmas holiday period” with Tom Lefroy, a family friend. Did Tom Lefroy, as a consequence of that short-lived Christmas dalliance, become the real Darcy? Jane started writing an early version of “Pride and Prejudice” - at that point it was called “First Impressions” - ten months after this Christmas meeting. Was it Tom Lefroy who was on her mind as she crafted the first version of the book? It is surely possible that it was he, but at least one other strong candidate exists. Had Cassandra, Jane’s sister, not destroyed so many of Jane’s letters, one might have a clearer notion as to the identity of the man who was the model for Darcy and the numerous other “Darcy” books now in existence, including Helen Fielding’s “Bridget Jones’ Diary.” (And let us not forget that “Darcy is mine!” T-shirt!) However, he remains a mystery.

I have, on previous occasions, referred to Mr. Tony Crane as a Darcy-like figure. How easily one could imagine him, for example, on a misty morning, in the fields of Hampshire, like Matthew Macfadyen in the 2005 filmed version of “Pride and Prejudice”, striding across the dew-soaked grass, with a long coat flowing behind him. Or dressed up in genuine Regency attire, like Alastair Sooke, the Arts journalist, in the BBC’s recent reconstruction of the Netherfield Ball, at Chawton House. But, really, to what extent could Mr. Tony Crane have been Miss Jane Austen’s source of inspiration, had he lived in her era?