The First Sexed-Up Mr Darcy was Named Colin, Just Not Firth.
Devoney Looser

The wet white shirt version of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr Darcy has become such an influential image that it’s difficult to imagine the character Before Colin. For Janeites of a certain age, Firth’s 1995 BBC portrayal remains so swoon-worthy that any next-generation daughters and granddaughters who would consider going in for Matthew Macfadyen or Sam Riley as their Darcy-of-choice would seem to need their heads examined.

Two decades on, we blithely repeat the story that Colin Firth is the Original Hot Darcy, his like never before seen in popular culture. To some degree, the claim is true. No previous actor-Darcy has enjoyed Firth’s exposure or impact. None has had a four-metre fiberglass replica of his torso displayed in the middle of lakes on two continents. (First displayed in London, the Firth-Darcy statue was sold to the National Trust of Australia and shipped abroad.)

When it comes to charting Darcy’s sexy history, however, we’ve been encouraged to go beyond the foundation of Firth. The importance of “revolutionary” screenwriter Andrew Davies’s reinterpretation of the character, remaking him as a man with noticeable libido, has been long touted. Davies, we’re told, was the first to rewrite *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of a desire-filled Darcy. Davies’s characterization has been described as trailblazing, because of Darcy’s newly discernible carnal yearnings.

But an earlier sexed-up, three-dimensional Darcy has a better claim to these honors. The actor’s name, too, was Colin. Noted English Shakespearean actor Colin Keith-Johnston (1896-1980) gave what was, by all accounts, a tour de force performance as a heartthrob, throbbing Darcy in 1935. It was in a big-budget *Pride and Prejudice* play, seen by tens of thousands, featuring stage directions that called for Darcy to display passion, to show hidden yearning, and to fold Elizabeth close to him, delivering a final, curtain-closing, heart-stopping kiss.

Keith-Johnston’s Darcy took Broadway and then London’s West End by storm. In my new book, *The Making of Jane Austen*, I tell the story of the first Colin’s pioneering Darcy performance, in what turned out to be a long-running hit play. Surviving publicity stills suggest a Darcy designed to set hearts, and all manner of female parts, aflutter. Photos of the performance reveal Keith-Johnston’s unforgettable knee-bending, pelvic tilt, as he stands audaciously close to Elizabeth. *The New Yorker* thought the pose so characteristic as to deserve a caricature (caricature from *New Yorker*, 7 December 1935, by Alfred Freuh).

Behind Colin-Keith Johnson’s groundbreaking performance was an innovative playwright. It’s perhaps fitting that the earliest sexed-up Darcy was the product of a female pen. That writer was the daring, dazzling
Helen Jerome (1883-1966). (I tell her story in my new book, too.) Although she touted herself in the American press as a middle-aged Englishwoman, married to an American oil executive, Jerome was instead the Australian-raised widow of a con artist and convicted forger (Jerome photo from Vogue 87.10 (May 15, 1936): 86.). A woman of modest origins—her Irish immigrant father was a civil servant in the postal service in New South Wales—Helen (then “Nellie”) had become Armand Jerome’s teen bride shortly after he was released from prison. It’s all more than just a little bit Lydia and Wickham.

Jerome’s *Pride and Prejudice* was incredibly influential on the shaping of Austen’s image in popular culture. We’ve known for some time that the play led to the 1940 MGM film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, the first big-screen adaptation of an Austen novel. Still, we haven’t made as much of the stage-to-screen origins of MGM’s film as we ought. One fact that’s gone unnoticed is that Jerome’s play itself was also filmed. That makes it—and not the 1938 London televised version, or the enduring 1940 Hollywood release—the first *Pride and Prejudice* on celluloid.

The play was captured in its entirety by an MGM camera and sound crew, in order to be used as a guide for future picture adapters, as reported in the *New York Times*’s “Film Gossip of the Week” in May 1936. No evidence survives of the filmed play (which hasn’t come to light), but it’s of course possible that it was used in that way. Regardless, it’s likely that Keith-Johnson’s Darcy’s left an imprint on subsequent actors.

Thus far Jerome has only played a bit part in Jane Austen’s reception history. She deserves recognition. She was a big personality, as well as a chameleon, described as “a bit of a ‘grand dame,’” with an “eighteenth century spinal column” and “an extremely unproletarian outlook from her study windows” over upper Fifth Avenue and the park. Elsewhere she’s described as gray-haired, petite, and powerful—capable of towering like a monolith. An excellent vocal mimic, she was said to have held a pet theory that good dramatists must necessarily be good actors. She’d certainly had occasion to put that theory to work in her own life.

The gossip columnist reported that Jerome looks forward with “temperate enthusiasm to the screening of her play”—meaning its adaptation to film—expressing a strong desire that Norma Shearer play the film’s Elizabeth Bennet and Kathryn Kidder its Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Jerome reports that Kidder was recently screen tested by MGM. (In the end, Greer Garson was cast as MGM’s Elizabeth, with Edna May Oliver as Lady Catherine.) MGM’s production schedule slowed for several reasons, including the tragically early death of Shearer’s producer-husband. When the project re-started, Jerome doesn’t appear to have had anything further to do with it, other than her big payday of $50,000 for the play’s screen rights.

After her Austen-inspired play’s triumph, Jerome turned to a passionate dramatic adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. Its American stage production would star Katharine Hepburn, an actor the first producer of Jerome’s Broadway *Pride and Prejudice* once coveted but failed to get for Elizabeth Bennet. (Jerome’s Broadway Elizabeth was played by Adrianne Allen.) Jerome’s *Jane Eyre* play
(1936) was not, however, a repeat runaway success. And Jerome apparently had no further stage triumphs. Her only daughter, Carmen Ursula Jerome—from her marriage with the convicted forger—did end up with her own final-act, fairy-tale union. Carmen’s third, late-life marriage was to a Viscount, an event that her mother lived just long enough to know about and perhaps to witness.

But to return to fictional men worth £10,000 a year: Which actor did Jerome want for the MGM film-version of Darcy? Did she want Colin Keith-Johnston? No evidence appears to survive recording her preferences, although it’s hard to imagine that she wouldn’t have had strong feelings. Keith-Johnston, who joined the US touring production of *Pride and Prejudice* after its Broadway run, would go on to have many further stage and screen roles. He would also gain some notoriety for his personal life, including an accusation of adultery and a divorce. (He got around, as he was reputedly a lover, as a younger man, of Tallulah Bankhead.)

Jane Austen film buffs know perfectly well that Keith-Johnston would not become MGM’s big-screen Darcy. Many hunks were considered, but in the end Laurence Olivier was cast. He added his own inimitable stamp to the parade of pulse-raising actors playing Darcy, proving the most enduring one until Firth. Still, neither Firth nor Olivier ought to be called the prototype for desirous Darcy. That honor must go to the other Colin—the rightful first hot Darcy of stage and celluloid—Colin Keith-Johnston.