

# *The Heiress*

By Molly Greeley

## Behind the Book Essay

When my oldest child was a newborn, her needs were constant and utterly overwhelming. She cried almost all the time. I sat staring, in a sleep-deprived blur, around my house, wondering how I was ever supposed to get anything done when she never, ever wanted to be put down.

Wondering how women centuries ago had managed the hard work of caring for their new babies alongside the brutal labor that comprised day-to-day life—scrubbing clothes, building fires, cleaning, sowing, harvesting, hauling water, sewing, mending. They must, I thought, looking down at my daughter with a sort of dark humor, have drugged their babies in order to get other work accomplished.

It wasn't until years later when I was researching my first book that I discovered, horrifyingly, that my dark mental joke wasn't far from the truth. Names kept popping up as I researched Regency-era childrearing; clever, sinisterly-calming names. *Godfrey's Cordial*. *Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup*. *Daffy's Elixir*. *Street's Infant Quietness*. These were the names of just a few of the laudanum formulas that were peddled to parents, beginning in the 18th century, as cures for everything from teething to colic, and which were used widely in both poor households and in the nurseries of the rich. Laudanum is a tincture of opium, and the unregulated nature of these formulas had tragic results—children died of overdose with terrible regularity, and sometimes wasted away because they were too lethargic even to cry from hunger.

Appalled and morbidly curious, I looked into these drugs further, and when I learned of some of the symptoms of laudanum use—among them appetite suppression, lethargy, and respiratory depression—my mind leapt immediately to Anne de Bourgh, sitting limp and too-thin as her companion fussed over her lack of appetite; incapable, according to her mother, of braving London or learning to play the pianoforte.

*Oh*, I thought; and even as I worked to finish *The Clergyman's Wife*, my debut novel, I was already starting to write *The Heiress* inside my head.

My first book, which explores the life and choices of *Pride and Prejudice's* Charlotte Lucas after her marriage to Mr. Collins, is very preoccupied with dowries and social mobility. Women living in Jane Austen's time, Charlotte included, were in general very reliant upon men for their well-being. Few jobs were open to them, and except in exceptional circumstances, a woman's personal wealth, if she was fortunate enough to have any, went to her husband upon their marriage. And in an era when wife-selling was not unheard of and death in childbirth was a very real danger, relying on a man could be a bleak prospect.

But Anne de Bourgh is an exception. With her vast riches and the estate she inherits from her father, Anne is incredibly lucky for a Regency-era woman, and the more I thought about her, the harder it was to rid myself of a niggling irritation with her. She seemed, I thought, both entirely oblivious to her good fortune and willing to squander the opportunities—for travel, for education, for making a difference in the world—that came with it. Compared to Charlotte Lucas, and certainly compared to the thousands of even-less-fortunate women living in Austen's time, Anne had *everything*, and yet she did exactly nothing with any of it.

I've always tended toward curiosity about people's—and characters'—inner lives and motivations, however, and *Pride and Prejudice* leaves us with a lot of unanswered questions

about Anne. She is something of an empty vessel in Austen's book, sitting quietly in the corner, filled only when other characters express their opinions of her. From Mr. Collins, we learn that Miss de Bourgh is "unfortunately of a sickly constitution," but "perfectly amiable," though of course his opinions are hard to trust when we know how overawed he becomes in the presence of wealth. Lady Catherine makes no apologies for her daughter's frailty, and even seems weirdly proud of it—and prouder still of Anne's imaginary talents, which would, her mother assures anyone who will listen, be prodigious had her health allowed. To her cousin Mr. Darcy, Anne might as well not exist; he spends his visit to Rosings Park, or at least that part to which Elizabeth Bennet is privy, completely ignoring her. And Elizabeth herself finds Anne alarming for her thinness and pallor, amusing for her poor manners, and, ultimately, completely insignificant.

But Anne's thoughts and feelings about herself and the people around her are left to the reader's imagination; she never speaks except offstage. Even when she Lady Catherine both smile at the mention of Anne's someday-nuptials, Anne's smile can be interpreted as either gladness at the prospect or as a reflexive response—vaguely polite, and easier than making the effort, particularly in the presence of her overbearing mother, of voicing her own opinions.

If her illness was not truly an illness at all, I thought, but a dependence on laudanum, then perhaps the perceptions of just about every character in the book were wrong. After all, the nature of her illness is never disclosed in Austen's novel; we have to take the word of Anne's mother that Anne is, indeed, ill at all. And if she wasn't truly ill, her wealth gave her an independence that offered more freedom of choice than most women had in Regency times.

In *The Clergyman's Wife*, I wrote about a woman constrained by her circumstances. Charlotte Lucas' story will always mean a great deal to me, but it was, I have to admit,

gloriously freeing to write *The Heiress*: the story of a woman whose life wasn't filled with only obstacles, but with possibilities. A woman who, with enough courage, could live, and love, however she chose.