

# Timeline around birth of Eliza Williams

Helena Kelly, in *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical*, argues that Jane Austen expects her more perceptive readers to become aware of the “problem of the dates not quite adding up”, and conclude that Colonel Brandon’s story is a complete fabrication, and that he “is very much in the frame as a potential father to the younger Eliza”.

The dates don’t add up, she argues, because the phrase “this unhappy period” definitely refers to the time when Brandon received news of the divorce, and that therefore news of the divorce getting to Brandon and the birth of Eliza II cannot be squeezed into the timeframe of his story.

We would suggest that, even if one accepts this timeline, it is not certain that he was in England at the time of Eliza’s conception. And furthermore, if one accepts the other alternative – that the phrase “this unhappy period” refers to news that his brother was divorcing Eliza getting to Brandon in India – it is just as possible to construct a timetable that accounts for all the dates Austen gives.

## Time periods that we are given

- Brandon is the same age as Eliza I. (‘Our ages were nearly the same.’)
- When Eliza I was 17, she married Brandon’s brother. (‘At seventeen she was lost to me for ever. She was married—married against her inclination to my brother.’)
- Brandon went to the East Indies shortly after the wedding. (‘I meant to promote the happiness of both by removing from her for years, and for that purpose had procured my exchange’ and ‘But can we wonder that, with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, and without a friend to advise or restrain her (for my father lived only a few months after their marriage, and I was with my regiment in the East Indies) she should fall?’)
- Brandon heard of the divorce two years after the wedding. (‘The shock which her marriage had given me,’ he continued, in a voice of great agitation, “was of trifling weight—was nothing to what I felt when I heard, about two years afterwards, of her divorce.’)
- Brandon returned to England **either** three years after the wedding **or** three years after he learned of the divorce. (‘It was nearly three years after this unhappy period before I returned to England.’)
- He found Eliza I six months later. (‘after I had been six months in England, I DID find her’)
- Eliza II was three years old when her mother died. (‘She left to my care her only child, a little girl, the offspring of her first guilty connection, who was then about three years old.’)
- The death of Eliza I was **probably** fourteen years ago. (‘Ah! Miss Dashwood—a subject such as this—untouched for fourteen years—it is dangerous to handle it at all!’)
- Brandon inherited Delaford five years ago. (‘after the death of my brother, (which happened about five years ago, and which left to me the possession of the family property,)’)
- Three years ago Eliza II ‘had just reached her fourteenth year’. This could mean **either** she had just had her thirteenth birthday (and so started on her fourteenth year) **or** she has just had her fourteenth birthday.
  - However, given that she was three years old when her mother died fourteen years ago, it is likely that she had just had her fourteenth birthday.

- One year ago, Eliza II disappeared. ('But last February, almost a twelvemonth back, she suddenly disappeared.')
- Eliza II wrote to Brandon the previous October. ("The first news that reached me of her," he continued, "came in a letter from herself, last October"')

## Helena Kelly's interpretation

Kelly writes that:

It is 'about two years' after Eliza married that he hears of 'her divorce'. Divorce was not, at the time, a quick affair; each required its own bill in parliament. Add to this the fact that the Colonel is with his regiment in India, and that the news has to travel there from England, a journey which, even with favourable weather, was likely to take four months or more, and it begins to look as if the marriage got into serious difficulties very early on. The Colonel tells Elinor that it was 'nearly three years after this unhappy period before I returned to England. Is that three years since the divorce, or since he heard of the divorce, or since Eliza married? It isn't entirely clear.

Kelly argues that we can't be sure whether Eliza II was born before or after the divorce. And she suggests that 'What Colonel Brandon intends, by mentioning all these dates, is surely to indicate that the child isn't his.'

Looking at the fact that Brandon is 35 when we first meet him, and turns 36 towards the end of the novel, and that fourteen years ago Eliza II was three years old, she points out that this means Brandon must have been eighteen, or at the outside nineteen, when the younger Eliza was born.

She argues that he describes events to Elinor 'in such a way as to allow her to conclude that he spent five years in India and so could not possibly be considered as a candidate – it seems that Colonel Brandon is very much in the frame as a potential father'. She also comments on his careful terminology – 'the child is 'the offspring' of his cousin's 'first guilty connection'. That first guilty connection could have been Brandon, rather than a lover she took after her marriage.

She also speculates that Brandon's Christian name *could* have been 'William', and therefore the surname used for the illegitimate Eliza II *could* have been drawn from this. (There is no evidence for either of these speculations.)

## Some comments on Kelly's arguments

Kelly made the point that the divorce could not have been finalized and news reached the East Indies within two years. However, Brandon could have got news that divorce proceedings were beginning within this time frame. And if he knew they had begun, he could well assume that the outcome was inevitable.

If Eliza II had been conceived before Brandon left England, then she would have been born within nine months of the marriage, and so presumably before the divorce. Therefore she would have been 'Eliza Brandon', not 'Eliza Williams', as she was born in wedlock. And even if Brandon's brother had disowned her, wouldn't Mrs Jennings have been aware of this fact?

Had she been born so early in the marriage that Brandon's brother doubted her paternity, then quite likely Brandon would have been named as a co-respondent in the divorce.

Kelly asks the question 'If it was really eighteen months or two years after the Colonel left for India, how young was he precisely when he was planning to elope to Scotland – fifteen?' The text does not explicitly state it, but I think the logical assumption is that the elopement happened when Brandon and Eliza learned that she was about to be married to his brother, and so elopement seemed the only option. We do not know how long she was held without liberty, society and amusement before agreeing to marry Brandon's brother, but he says it was 'some time': this suggests months, but not necessarily years.

Even if we accept Kelly's statement that the reason Brandon mentions so many dates is to indicate the child isn't his, this still allows for two possibilities: one, he is blurring some of the details to *hide* the truth that he is Eliza II's father; or two, that he is emphasising the (correct) dates to make clear the true fact that he is *not* Eliza II's father, since he knows many people believe that he is.

Kelly says that Brandon must have been 'eighteen ... or at the outside, nineteen' when Eliza II was born. But if he were nineteen then it would not have been possible for him to be her father, as he left for the Indies at age seventeen.

So finally, let us look at the timeline, and see if we can assume that Brandon is telling the truth, and make the dates work.

## Ellen's development of the timeline

Ellen's calculations were based on working out **years**.

*Sense and Sensibility* is interpreted here as if the book begins in 1810.

**I 1775:** Birth of Brandon and Eliza I (Brandon is 35 in Sept 1810)

**This means that**

**1792:** Marriage of Eliza I (aged 17), and Brandon's departure for East Indies.

**II 1797:** Brandon finds Eliza I in sponging house. (Fourteen years before Brandon tells his story to Elinor in February 1811.)

**This means that**

**1794:** Birth of Eliza II (3 years old when Brandon finds them.)

This means that she would have been conceived in 1793, or early 1794, but by this time Brandon was already in the East Indies.

It also means that 'three years after this unhappy period' probably does mean three years after news of the divorce, rather than three years after the marriage.

## Harriet's development of the timeline

Harriet's calculations were based on what we can work out about Brandon's **age** at the various points of the narrative.

- Eliza I is married and Brandon goes to the Indies. Brandon is **17**.
- Eliza I's divorce two years later. Brandon is **19**.

- **Assume he only spends three years in the East Indies, returning three years after the wedding (i.e. one year after the divorce).**
  - When he returns he is **20** (or maybe **21** if he had a birthday on the voyage home).
  - Six months later he finds her – he is **20/21**.
  - Therefore, Eliza II was born when he was about **17/18** and so *could* have been conceived while he was in England – although this is not necessarily so.
- **Assume he spends five years in the East Indies, returning three years after the divorce.**
  - When he returns he is **22** (or maybe **23** if he had a birthday on the voyage home).
  - Six months later he finds her – he is **22/23**.
  - Therefore, Eliza II was born when he was about **19/20** and so *must* have been conceived *after* Brandon left for the Indies at 17.

**So now let's work backwards from when he is telling the story to Elinor.**

- We don't know exactly when his birthday is – in September he is 35, but by the time Elinor and Edward are engaged (say, April) he is 36. So he is **35/36** when he tells the story to Elinor.
- Fourteen years ago, when Eliza II was 3, he would have been **21/22**
  - This means that when Eliza II was born he would have been **18/19**
  - If he was 18, she *could* have been conceived before he left England ... but she could *also* have been conceived after he left, and still been born while he was 18.
  - If he was 19, she could *not* have been conceived until after he left.
- It is also worth briefly considering the phrasing that three years ago Eliza II had 'reached her 14<sup>th</sup> year'.
  - I have seen 20<sup>th</sup> century sources that suggest you start your fourteenth year as soon as you have had your thirteenth birthday.
  - I do not know what the standard usage was at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I instinctively feel that the terminology 'just reached her fourteenth year' *should* mean something different from 'just had her fourteenth birthday'. But I have no actual evidence for this.
  - But supposing it to be standard – or at least not unusual – in Jane Austen's time to use the phrase as meaning 'just had her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday', how do we account for the inconsistency with the fact that fourteen years ago she was three years old? There are two possibilities:
    - It was a mistake – he should have said *thirteen* years ago. In which case, Eliza II was born a year later, and so Brandon was 19/20 at the time of her birth.
    - It is a deliberate inconsistency, to show that Brandon was fudging the timeline to prove that he could not be Eliza II's father, but didn't always manage to be consistent.

Or, of course, my 'instinctive' feeling is wrong, and it is a correct assumption that 'reached her fourteenth year' is the same as 'had her fourteenth birthday'.

## Conclusion

- The following three alternatives are all possible given the information Austen provides:
  - Brandon spent three years in the East Indies, and Eliza II was conceived before he left England.
  - Brandon spent three years in the East Indies, but even so, Eliza II was not conceived until after he had left England.
  - Brandon spent five years in the East Indies, and Eliza II was conceived during his time there.
- Of these three possibilities, only one makes Brandon a contender as Eliza's father. And even then, it is not a certainty – it just means he was in the right country at the right time. (Furthermore as noted above, this timeline would require Eliza to be born IN wedlock, not OUT OF wedlock, which creates its own set of inconsistencies.)
- The ambiguity of the phrase 'three years after this unhappy period' *could* be a deliberate obscurity by Austen that we are meant to pick up on. But it is also possible – and seems rather more likely - that it is a perfectly straightforward retelling of events: 'after two years the divorce happened, and then three years after that I came home'.

Harriet and Ellen, 2021.