

# JANE AUSTEN

MARGARET KENNEDY



THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS SERIES

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**THE EUROPEAN NOVELISTS SERIES**

**JANE AUSTEN**

*Uniform with this Volume:*

THE BRONTËS *by Phyllis Bentley*  
D H LAWRENCE *by Anthony West*  
HENRY FIELDING *by Elizabeth Jenkins*

**JANE AUSTEN**

**MARGARET KENNEDY**

**ARTHUR BARKER LIMITED**

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TO  
SALLY DAVIES



## CHAPTER I

# THE BACKGROUND

“You know all about these sort of things. Do tell us. Is Paris in France or France in Paris? For my wife has been disputing with me about it.”—A country squire to Jane Austen’s father, quoted by Mr. Austen Leigh.

**Q**UITE a number of people in this country have an impression that Jane Austen was an early Victorian—a contemporary of the Brontë Sisters. The motion pictures, which have recently shown us Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw and Elizabeth Bennet, all in identical crinolines, must bear some of the blame for this; but not all of it. A vagueness about her date and period exists among people who should know better—people who have read and admired her books. They know that she was pre-Victorian, but they think of her as a nineteenth-century novelist; as the first swallow of a new summer. Actually, in so far as she belonged to any period, she was Georgian. The Victorians did not care for her; she belonged to an age from which they had too recently escaped.

Mr. Hugh Thomson is partly responsible. Many of us first met her in books illustrated by him, and he dressed everybody in the costumes of Waterloo year—in short, skimpy, high-waisted gowns and hair curled on the top of the head. But Miss Austen’s earlier books were written some time before these fashions reached England. The Bennets and the Dashwoods wore long, full skirts with a slight train. Hoops had only just gone out. Waists were high, but the bosom was not forced up by the corset and liberally displayed, in the style so much admired by Napoleon and so much disliked by Miss Austen. The hair was worn in a fine cloud of little curls over neck and shoulders, as if rejoicing in its recent release from powder and pomatum. In the “morning,” which lasted until four o’clock, it was swathed in a loose muslin cap. By Waterloo year caps, for younger women, were out of fashion; but Miss Austen stuck to hers, though her nieces complained that it looked dowdy, because it saved her the trouble of curling her hair at the back.

But it is not really the caps and gowns which confuse us, so much as the books themselves. They seem to be so utterly removed in thought, sentiment and atmosphere from all that we have come to associate with the eighteenth century. Richardson and Fielding are, for us, the typical novelists of that age,

and no cap can bridge the gulf between Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Richardson's Pamela Andrews. These girls live in different worlds, although the same reign saw the deaths both of Richardson and of Jane Austen.

They are feminine worlds, which makes it easier to compare them. Richardson wrote of and for women, whereas Fielding wrote of and for men and dealt with many subjects which were quite outside Miss Austen's experience. But Fielding's Amelia is a more credible grandmother for Elizabeth than is Pamela.

A typical Richardson scene is that in which Pamela's poor old father is introduced to the best society in Lincolnshire. Dr. Peters, a respectable clergyman, Mrs. Peters, Sir Simon and Lady Darnford, and Lady Jones have all been aware, for many a week, of the tragedy impending at B——n Hall. They know that Mr. B—— has forcibly abducted a poor village girl, not sixteen years old, and is keeping her prisoner there in charge of an old procuress. Mr. Williams, the good young curate, has been to each of them in turn, hoping in vain to enlist some sympathy on her behalf. When at length, attempted rape and a mock marriage having proved ineffectual, Mr. B—— decides to marry Pamela, they are all agog to see her. They descend upon the Hall in a body and while they are there old Mr. Andrews arrives. He has been searching the country on foot for his daughter, terrified by threats, and misled by the downright lies which Mr. B—— never scruples to tell.

My master bid Mrs. Jewkes not let me know yet that my father was come; and went to the company, and said: "I have been agreeably surprised; here is honest old Goodman Andrews come full of grief to see his daughter: he fears she is seduced; and tells me, good honest man, that, poor as he is, he will not own her if she be not virtuous." "O," said they all with one voice almost, "Dear Sir! Shall we not see this good old man?" . . . "If," said he, "I thought Pamela would not be too much affected with the surprise, I would make you all witness to their first interview."

And so he does. He brings the weeping father in first, and the company amuses itself by paying him cryptic compliments upon his daughter's conquest. "You have a sweet daughter, Honesty; we are all in love with her." He does not know what to make of it, fears that they are "upon the jest" with him, but is a little comforted to hear "such good ladies say so." Then Pamela appears, quite unprepared, and faints away at the sight of her father, after so long and cruel a separation. Well-bred Lincolnshire is "painfully delighted."

This is but one instance of the gross insensitiveness, the barbarous indelicacy habitually displayed by these good ladies. It is a great concession to decency when, upon another occasion, Lady Darnford sends the footmen out of the room before forcing Pamela to oblige the company with the whole history of Mr. B——'s attempts on her. The housemaids, however, are brought in to hear it, that they may learn how virtue is rewarded.

It has been said that Richardson might not have done justice to the ladies of his period because he never met any. But they all read this book with great approbation and do not seem to have considered themselves libelled. Protest was left to the virile Fielding.

Jane Austen gives us many pictures of coarse and insensitive people, but she affords no hint of any society in which such incidents could have occurred. Lady Darnford is as alien to her world as to ours. And thus we get an impression that well-bred society must have taken a great stride forward in the latter half of the century, a stride not only in moral standards but in sensitiveness and refinement.

A stride had been taken, but not by everybody. All classes had, no doubt, improved in these respects; there had been a step forward everywhere: in the cottage, in the farm, in the manor house and at the Court. But not all had covered an equal distance or advanced at the same pace. The aristocracy and the landed gentry had not felt that impetus for improvement which animated the class immediately below them, the class of the unlanded gentry, into which Jane Austen was born.

A gentleman was, originally, a man of property who did no work of any kind; and property meant land. The landed gentry established its position at the end of the sixteenth century, when the spoils, taken from the Church at the Reformation, were shared out. But the manor-house families were large and the number of acres in England remained the same. As time went on there came to be more gentlemen upon the ground than the ground could support. The enclosures of such poor common land as had hitherto been left for the peasantry could not for ever solve the problem. It became necessary that younger sons should do something to support themselves.

There was not much, at that time, which a gentleman felt himself able to do. If he had brains he could go to the Bar, but he might not be an attorney. The medical profession was banned, and so was trade, but banking was permitted. A commission might be bought for him in the Army, and constant sea warfare brought quick promotion and plenty of prize money in the Navy. But the Church was the great resource, since the aristocracy and the landed

gentry held most of the best livings in their hands, and sold them as a regular source of income. These livings could be bought for, or presented to, younger sons and sons-in-law, thus securing a comfortable income for them without obliging them to do any work whatever. Several livings might be held by one man and the law which obliged incumbents to live in their parishes was universally disregarded. The task of baptizing, marrying and burying the peasantry was carried on by ill-paid curates, who were never regarded as gentlemen.

Fielding's portraits of these poor country parsons are scarcely overdrawn. In *Joseph Andrews* he has given us Parson Adams:

Mr. Abraham Adams was an excellent scholar. He was a perfect master of the Greek and Latin languages . . . at the age of fifty he was provided with a handsome income of twenty-three pounds a year . . . and was a little encumbered with a wife and six children. . . . Adams had no nearer access to Sir Thomas or my lady than through the waiting gentlewoman; for Sir Thomas was too apt to estimate men merely by their dress or fortune and my lady . . . never spoke of any of her country neighbours by any other appellation than that of the brutes. They both regarded the curate as a kind of domestic only, belonging to the parson of the parish. . . . Mrs. Slipslop, the waiting gentlewoman, being herself the daughter of a curate, preserved some respect for Adams . . . but always insisted on a deference to be paid to her understanding, as she had been frequently at London, and knew more of the world than a country parson could pretend to.

In the same book there is Parson Trulliber, a gross rustic, who makes ends meet as a pig farmer.

These curates often married waiting maids, and, since their only hope of advancement came from the squire, they were obliged to be very humble and obsequious. Poor Mr. Williams, who tried to help Pamela, was thrown into prison for his pains, by Mr. B——'s influence, and kept there until he was ready to lick his patron's boots.

To such men the stewardship of the Church was entrusted while the privileged classes enjoyed the bulk of the Church revenues. And, until Wesley arose, they led their rustic parishioners in that great anthem which begins:

*Bless the Squire and his relations,  
And keep us in our proper stations!*

But, as the eighteenth century rolled on, an increasing number of gentlemen-incumbents took to living in their own parishes and doing the work for which they were paid. There were two reasons for this.

The first was economic. Every year brought from the universities a fresh wave of younger sons who wanted livings. Pluralities became less common as the available patronage had to be shared out among more and more claimants. And wives brought smaller dowries. Every year saw a fresh bevy of young ladies making their appearance at the Assize Balls. Their marriage portions grew smaller, since the propertied classes were doing little to increase their wealth. So that the parson who, at the beginning of the century, might hold three or four benefices, amounting to some thousands a year, might hold now only one, worth a few hundreds. The gentleman-incumbent had grown poorer, and the best way to retrench was to live in his own rectory and cut the cost of a curate. The work was not, after all, very difficult or strenuous. One service a week was all that custom demanded, and a few score cottagers did not require to be married and buried very often. On his diminished income he could still live very comfortably; his wife might play the harp and continue to attend Assize Balls. The neighbourhood of the Manor House or the Hall was an advantage to him, since his own or his wife's relations probably lived there.

The other reason for this increased residence of gentleman-parsons was, in a sense, political. The influence of Wesley and the growth of non-conformity roused the Church. Privilege, taking fright, recaptured a sense of responsibility. That class which had ruled Britain since 1600 has always been singularly sensitive to any slipping of its power, and surprisingly swift to counter any menacing change. The Church of England had hitherto served to keep a dangerous element in harness, but now it needed strengthening; Adams, Trulliber and Williams required support. If the people were to go on blessing Squire, as a religious duty, it would be as well that one of Squire's relations should occasionally lead the chorus in person, and that parsons in general should receive more overt respect. Many Bishops were bent on reform and were waging war against pluralities and non-residence. Some pressure was put upon young men taking Orders to regard their calling more seriously. The more intelligent and responsible among them responded.

Many circumstances favoured a swift improvement of manners, morals and refinement among parsons of this type. Work, a profession of any sort,

materially alters and widens a man's point of view. It brings him into closer touch with other men and he has to answer to somebody for what he does. The position of these men protected them from the two great evils of the age: the arrogance of the rich and the degrading humility of the poor. Their incomes preserved them from the materialism which attends upon great wealth or grinding penury. If they wished, they could cultivate good taste, but they were unable to corrupt it by extravagance. They could buy Wedgwood dinner-services but they could not deface the country-side with sham Gothic ruins.

They were, naturally, alive to the advantages of education, since their sons must be self-supporting. An aristocrat educates his son to be what he has been himself; he cannot imagine any possible improvement. A poor, or comparatively poor, man hopes that his children will go further than he has. He wants to see them better prepared to face the world. His daughters, if they marry, must be so thoroughly accomplished that they can set and maintain a standard of refinement in their own homes.

The sons and sons-in-law of the country parson, in the Army, in the Navy, at the Bar, brought him and his women-folk into touch with the great world outside the parish. His pride in them taught him to value independence and exertion.

Thus it came about that, by the end of the century, a country parson might often be a great deal more refined, more well-informed, even more of a man of the world, than some of his propertied neighbours. Considerable attention must be given to this fact, because it influenced Miss Austen's work very strongly, and gave a marked bias to her point of view.

As soon as she opened her very sharp eyes and began to look about her, she must have perceived three things. Firstly, she realised that the manners and the culture to which she had been accustomed in her father's house were by no means universal. Secondly, that much lower standards might often be observed in large country houses, among powerful landowners. And thirdly, that these great folk did not seem to be aware of their shortcomings. In their own opinion they were still a superior class, still better bred than anybody else. And they still supposed that a man who has to work must rank a good deal lower than one who has not. In their eyes a country parson had risen but little from the status of Adams and Trulliber, of whom many examples were still to be found. Policy might dictate a more respectful treatment of him, a pretence of equality, he might dine occasionally at the squire's table instead of with the waiting woman, but it was by no means to be expected that his

wife should be a lady. And to all these discoveries Miss Austen bore witness in her novels.

“A clergyman like you must marry,” says Lady Catherine de Bourgh to Mr. Collins. “Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high.”

“Formerly,” says Mary Crawford, “parsons were very inferior even to what they are now.”

“Wentworth?” exclaims Sir Walter Elliot. “Oh! Ay—the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term *gentleman*. I thought you were speaking of some man of property.”

These are quotations from her first, fourth and last books. At some period in her life, probably very early, she seems to have formed a strong prejudice against rich people, titled people and great landowners. Some startling encounter with boorish complacency or stupid arrogance created a bias from which she never quite freed herself. Time qualified it. In the course of her life she met with people in this class whom she could love, admire and respect, who were her equals in refinement and who possessed, perhaps, a little more of the world’s polish. But the early bias remained and is responsible for the pride of Pemberley, the arrogance of Rosings, the cupidity of Norland, the rustic conviviality of Barton, the instability of Mansfield, the tasteless splendour of Sotherton, the mediocrity of Uppercross, the snobbery of Kellynch. It is reflected in the avarice of General Tilney, the oafishness of Lord Osborne, and the insipidity of “our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret.” Nor does it allow her to say very much on the other side. Where, in all the novels, do we find a truly superior squire against whom nothing can be said? Only in the bachelor establishments of Donwell and Delaford. Mr. Knightley and Colonel Brandon share the other scale between them.

She could, it is true, lash the small as well as the great. She could create the Steeles and the Thorpes. But it must be observed that the vulgarity of the smaller fry is generally used to set off the false standards, the lack of discrimination, shown by their betters. Lucy Steele completely imposes upon Barton and on the Ferrars family. General Tilney knows no better than to gossip with John Thorpe. The designing Mrs. Clay very nearly marries Sir Walter Elliot. Snobbery is shown to impair the judgement, and arrogance has no defence against a toady.

It would be going too far to say that she attacked the privileged classes. She could satirise, but she was not really a satirist. Her genius was for comedy, and of all the comic subjects that engaged her this was the recurring joke: that the landed gentry considered itself superior and, in fact, was not. In nearly all her stories a vital element is the imperviousness of these people, their complete incomprehension of any standard of values which might exist beyond the narrow compass of their park palings.

She has often been described as a lady, which she was, and as being equally at home in the parsonage and the manor house, which she assuredly was not. She shows us the great house through the eyes of the small one, the neighbouring cottage, or as a visitor, a dependant, a poor relation or a maiden aunt. Only at Hartfield does she move with the ease of an inhabitant; only in *Emma* do we share the thoughts of a well-dowered girl whose right it is to open all the local balls.

Nor are we, in the novels, quite at home in the parsonage. It was her own background, but she does not use it for any of her heroines. Catherine Morland came from one, but we only see her in it for the last three chapters of *Northanger Abbey*. We call at the parsonage, we visit there, many important scenes take place in parsonage parlours, but we get nothing of the general texture of life in a clergyman's family. Three of her heroines marry parsons; we never see them in action. Were it not for *Emma*, that treasure house of exceptions, we should have little notion of their duties. Mr. Elton preaches sermons, attends Parish meetings, and is once caught visiting a cottage.

She wrote about the parsonage and the manor house because that was the world she knew, but she never seems quite to belong to either. She is always a little aloof. Nor can we guess in what atmosphere she would really have felt herself at home; we know too little about her. We do not know if she ever met any people who affected her as the Harvilles affected Anne Elliot, when they welcomed all the world into "rooms so small as none but those who invite from the heart could think capable of accommodating so many," or said to herself, as Anne said: "These would have been all my friends." We do not know if she would have liked to cross the Atlantic four times with Mrs. Croft, the Admiral's wife, or to explain to the stay-at-homes that "we do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies." We only know that her existence was spent on a sofa beside people like old Mrs. Musgrove who "could not accuse herself of ever having called them anything in the whole course of her life."



And we know that sometimes, when so sitting, she would burst into sudden, inexplicable laughter, jump up, and hurry to her little desk.

No girl, in 1796, could hurry to her desk without some thoughts of Fanny Burney who, in 1778, when Jane Austen was three years old, had proved to the world that the dream of every girl who scribbles in secret can, once in a hundred years, come true. Her stepmother had told her to stop scribbling and mind her needle. But at the age of twenty-five, with a first novel, she shot like a rocket from obscurity to fame, captured all the critics, was fêted by the whole fashionable world, and could thumb her nose at her stepmother. Dr. Johnson called her his Little Character Monger; he went about quoting her dialogue: "Only think, Polly! Miss has danced with a lord! And pray, Miss, what did he say to you?" Could any girl ask for more?

The ambition to become a little character-monger burned forthwith beneath a thousand muslin fichus, and publishers were offered so many three-volume novels in the style of Fanny Burney that they refused to read any more.

Jane Austen had all the necessary gifts for a great success in this line. She had a lively wit, a turn for satire, keen powers of observation, a strong sense of the ridiculous, and a youthful hardness of heart. She had a wider field than Fanny who satirised the meanly-born but respected the Great, respected them too much, allowed them to catch her at the apex of her rocket flight and immure her in a palace whence she emerged a broken creature. Jane Austen was not respectful; she saw promising material upstairs as well as down. As a little character-monger she could find plenty to say and the only likely obstacle was a half-realised vocation for pure comedy.

But comedy is an adult medium, and her childish writings were all, as might be expected, exuberantly satirical. At the age of twenty-one she was still uncertain; her future, as an artist, must have been very much in the balance. As a little character-monger she might have earned more fame in her lifetime, but she might not have reached the place which she holds today or have ever risen above the *little*. Great satire demands qualities which she did not possess: a virile, powerful and trained intellect, pugnacity and considerable knowledge of the world.

Satire and comedy are often confused because both are, generally, amusing and because writers of comedy often possess some skill in satire and use it to underline their points. But in object and origin these two forms of art are totally unlike. The object of satire is to disconcert; it is amusing

because most people, when disconcerted, prefer to laugh it off. Satire is provoked by complacency, by false conventions, by formulae which may once have been truths but which have come to cause a stasis in ideas which are clogging the current of thought. This is the genesis of all great satire, the motive force of which is indignation. When the complacency is very thick-skinned, the humbug abnormally gross, it can become savage, as in the cases of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, or Huxley's *Brave New World*. Such books are the satirists' challenge to humanity: *Try to laugh that one off!*

Comedy discriminates but does not reprove, has no general indignation, and is kindly to man, though laughing at his foibles, his fantasies, his inconsistencies and his egotism. It springs from that warm pleasure which we all feel, at times, in the human scene and in social life, in spite of all the sorrow and the evil and the pain. This pleasure is as true and vital an element in our experience as any other emotion. Its power to raise us above the level of the brute, to purify our hearts, may not be so exalted as the nobler, the more profound appeal of tragedy, but it is felt by us more constantly, and a special Muse has been put in charge of it.

This Muse, beholding in 1796 the indecision of a chosen votary, took matters into her own hands. She granted one of those lightning flashes of pure inspiration which no artist can hope to experience more than once or twice in his life. She descended from Parnassus to Hampshire with a bait, a sample of the treasures to be found in her genial domain. The bribe was artfully fashioned: a laughing, dark-eyed girl, no older than the votary, a heaven-born companion with whom to venture upon those untried slopes. It was accepted and then there was no turning back. With the creation of Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen was vowed to comedy.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LIFE

We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined. . . .—*Persuasion*.

**T**HE REVEREND GEORGE AUSTEN came of a Kentish family. He was orphaned at an early age and inherited no property. But an uncle, a successful attorney at Tonbridge, educated him. From Tonbridge School he got a scholarship to Oxford and later became a Fellow of St. John's College. He took Orders and, on his marriage in 1764, benefices were found for him. His uncle bought for him the rectory of Deane in Hampshire; the adjoining rectory of Steventon was presented to him by Mr. Knight, a distant connection who held considerable property in Hampshire and in Kent. The two villages were so near that he could do the work of both parishes. He married Miss Cassandra Leigh, whose father had been a Fellow of All Souls and whose uncle was Master of Balliol for over fifty years.

The Austens lived at Deane until 1771 when they removed to Steventon, where Jane was born in 1775 and where she spent the first twenty-six years of her life. She was the seventh of eight children, six boys and two girls. James, the eldest, took Orders. We know little of the second, George, who was an invalid, and a great deal about Edward, the third, who became a man of property. Mr. Knight, who had presented the Steventon living, adopted Edward who ultimately took the name of Knight and inherited the estates of Godmersham in Kent and Chawton in Hampshire. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Brook Bridges of Goodnestone, pronounced Gunstone, by whom he had a large family. Henry, the fourth Austen son, became a banker and married a cousin, the Comtesse de Feuillide, whose first husband had been guillotined in 1794. His bank broke in 1816, whereupon he too took Orders. The two youngest sons, Charles and Frank, both went into the Navy and both rose to be Admirals, Frank ending his life as Senior Admiral of the Fleet. Cassandra, the other girl, was two years older than Jane and nearer to her heart than anybody else of whom we hear. The sisters were devoted to one another and, when apart, wrote to each other oftener than some of their family thought necessary.

They were a lively, affectionate, intelligent clan, very fond and very proud of one another. By modern standards, Jane Austen led a narrow and limited life. She never went abroad. She knew little of the north of England. Hampshire and Kent were her territory, with visits to Lyme, Dawlish, Teignmouth and Sidmouth, a week or so with Henry in London now and then; some years at Bath and some in Southampton. She never had a bedroom to herself. She never seems to have formed any close friendship outside the family circle. But, by the standards of those days, she had a good deal of amusement and freedom and more fun than many girls had. The proportion of boys to girls in the family was an advantage. The two sisters had more consideration, probably, than they would have had if there had been six females and two males.

A great deal of their time was spent with their brother Edward in Kent, for, in 1798, Mr. Knight's widow gave up Godmersham to Edward and his young wife. The sisters seldom paid visits together, for one daughter was always needed at home, so that Godmersham visits meant a spate of letters. The life which emerges from these letters is very like the life led by most of the girls in the novels.

They walked, they rode, they made excursions; they played and sang, and sketched, and entertained callers. They read novels and sometimes braced themselves to attack stiffer books. They did a great deal of needlework, including all that hemming and stitching which is done nowadays by machine, and were responsible for the linen of their men-folk. They supervised the concoction of special family recipes such as "our black butter." They visited cottagers and gave shifts to old women; they trimmed bonnets and they went to church.

On red-letter days they had balls. Jane Austen adored dancing; it is a passion which she bestowed on all her heroines. And her own life, on the whole, cannot be better epitomised than by quoting her remarks about seven of the many balls mentioned in her letters.

1796. *From Steventon.*—We had an exceedingly good ball last night. We were so terrible good as to take James in our carriage though there were three of us before; but indeed he deserves encouragement for the very great improvement which has lately taken place in his dancing . . . I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. I *can* expose myself, however, only *once more*,

because he leaves the country soon after next Friday, on which day we *are* to have a dance at Ashe after all.

1798. *From Steventon*.—There were twenty dances and I danced them all and without fatigue. I was glad to find myself capable of dancing so much; . . . I had not thought myself equal to it, but in cold weather and with a few couples I fancy I could just as well dance for a week together as for half an hour. My black cap was openly admired by Mrs. Lefroy, and secretly I imagine by everybody else in the room.

1799. *From Steventon*.—I do not think I was very much in request. People were rather apt not to ask me till they could not help it; one's consequence, you know, varies so much at times without any particular reason. There was one gentleman, an officer of the Cheshire, a very good looking young man, who, I was told, wanted very much to be introduced to me; but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, we never could bring it about.

1804. *From Lyme*.—The ball last night was pleasant. My father staid contentedly till half past nine (we went a little after eight) and then walked home with James and a lanthorn, though I believe the lanthorn was not lit, as the moon was up; but sometimes this lanthorn may be a great convenience to him. My mother and I staid about an hour later. Nobody asked me the first two dances; the two next I danced with Mr. Crawford and had I chosen to stay longer might have danced with Mr. Granville . . . whom my dear friend Miss A. introduced to me, or with a new odd looking man who had been eyeing me for some time, and at last, without any introduction, asked me if I meant to dance again.

1808. *From Southampton*.—Our ball was rather more amusing than I expected. Martha liked it very much, and I did not gape till the last quarter of an hour. . . . The melancholy part was to see so many dozen young women standing by without partners, and each of them with two ugly naked shoulders.

It was the same room in which we danced fifteen years ago. I thought it all over, and in spite of the shame of being so much older, felt with thankfulness that I was quite as happy now as then. You will not expect to hear that *I* was asked to dance, but I was—by the gentleman whom we met *that Sunday* with Captain

D'Auvergne. . . . Being pleased with his black eyes, I spoke to him at the ball, which brought on me this civility; but I do not know his name, and he seems so little at home in the English language, that I believe his black eyes may be the best of him.

1809. *From Southampton*.—The Manydown ball was a smaller thing than I expected, but it seems to have made Anna very happy. At *her* age it would not have done for me.

1813. *From Godmersham*.—We did not go to the ball. . . . I was very glad to be spared the trouble of dressing and going, and being weary before it was half over, so my gown and my cap are still unworn. It will appear at last, perhaps, that I might have done without either.

Mr. Austen added to his income by taking pupils. One of them was a Thomas Fowle, to whom Cassandra later became engaged. He died in 1797 of fever in the West Indies, where he had gone as an army chaplain. She never married. The two sisters settled down to spinsterhood together. It is hinted by their brothers that they had offers, but they would not marry where they did not love.

Long after Jane's death, Cassandra told a niece, Caroline, that they had met somebody one summer, when they were staying by the sea, who had seemed to be greatly attracted by her sister. Had he declared himself she was sure that he would have been accepted. But he never did. Circumstances parted the young couple after a few weeks, and he died almost immediately, before they could meet again.

Mr. Warre Cornish mentions this story in his life of Jane Austen. Mr. Austen Leigh, her nephew and the brother of Caroline, does not attach much importance to it in his *Memoir*. He thinks it very likely that the gentleman loved his aunt, but does not believe that her heart was ever won by anybody. All that he would admit was a "passing inclination." This cannot mean that he disbelieved Cassandra, who knew her sister better than any brother or nephew could. But he must have distrusted Caroline's account of the story—thought that she had misunderstood Cassandra or had touched it up.

The lot of an old maid, in those days, was such that few girls cared to face it. Marriage was the only career open to a woman; to remain single was to be branded as a failure, to be despised by other girls, patronised by married women, and ridiculed by men. Those who could not marry for love did so for a home, for independence, companionship and children. If they

did not they had to face the increasing “shame of being so much older,” diminishing consequence, financial dependence and a lifetime of submission to the wishes and whims of other people. When the pursuits and amusements of girlhood began to pall there was little to replace them, little to absorb or divert those passions and energies which should have been expended upon a husband and children. If an old maid became fussy, prim, gushing or sentimental, everybody laughed at her. If she grew envious, sour and spiteful, everybody condemned her. Only by the most severe self-discipline, by keeping her mouth shut, by constant attention to the comfort of other people, by sympathising, listening and running errands, could she hope to preserve the respect of the community.

It is impossible to believe that the girl who, at twenty-one, danced and flirted with such energy could ever have expected such a fate or have chosen it without a sigh. But Jane and Cassandra Austen had their sisterly alliance which must have gone far to mitigate the loneliness of a single life. They had intellectual resources beyond the average, brothers who valued them, and more liberty than most of their contemporaries. For Cassandra at least there was, too, an elevating principle: she had loved, she had known the best, and she would never compromise for a lesser good. If Jane was not speaking for herself she was speaking for her sister when, in *Persuasion*, she gave to Anne Elliot that poignant defence of woman’s constancy: “All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.”

And Jane had her little desk, a modest, portable writing case which sat inconspicuously in the parlour among the crayons, the netting boxes and the fringe frames. Between 1792 and 1798 it contained the manuscripts of four complete novels: *Lady Susan*, *First Impressions* (later called *Pride and Prejudice*), *Elinor and Marianne* (afterwards called *Sense and Sensibility*), and *Northanger Abbey*.

How, when and where she wrote these books we shall never know. Nothing is to be learnt from the letters, and the accounts given by her family are unconvincing. They say she wrote sitting in the parlour amid all the family comings and goings; that she did not like anyone to know what she was doing and wrote upon small scraps of paper which could be hastily thrust into the desk if callers arrived; that she would not have a squeaking door in the passage repaired because it gave her notice of intruders; that she would often burst out laughing and rush to make a note. The squeaking door is the most significant detail in all this; that the family were willing to put up

with it for her convenience indicates more consideration than many girls would have received.

But this activity in the parlour cannot possibly have been all. Hours of solitude, reverie and intense concentration there must have been, somewhere and somehow. She had her own world, concealed in that house like the enclosure in a convent, to which she could retreat, a forbidden city, remote as Lhasa, where the real task of creation was carried out. Months of thought and effort must have been spent there before the writing stage began. But we never get any glimpse of her *alone*. Perhaps she was an early riser. Breakfast was late in those days; many families did not assemble for the first meal together before ten o'clock. There were some hours for private life in the early morning.

She wrote for the pleasure of writing and with little hope of publication. In 1797, her father offered *First Impressions* to a publisher, but he was incautious enough to mention *Evelina* and the offer was declined by return of post. *Northanger Abbey* was sold to a publisher in 1803, but he did nothing with it and one of her brothers eventually bought back the copyright. She did not get into print until *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811. The six novels which made her famous were written over a period of twenty-one years, between 1796 and 1817, but they were all published close together between 1811 and 1818.

Never has art for art's sake been more diligently pursued. She wrote because she loved to write and she made her work as perfect as she could because, as she said herself: "An artist cannot do anything slovenly." But she did not say this about her books; she said it laughingly about some designs which she had made to amuse an infant nephew.

Girlhood came to an end suddenly in 1800. Mr. Austen announced his intention of leaving Steventon and retiring to Bath. Very seldom does any Austen admit that Jane was ever unhappy, save over a tribal calamity, but Mr. Austen Leigh states that on this occasion she was exceedingly miserable. Cassandra was away at Godmersham at the time of this decision and the usual letters were passing between the sisters. But between 20th November 1800 and 3rd January 1801 there is a gap; no letters during those weeks have been preserved. Cassandra, after her sister's death, destroyed all letters which she thought that Jane would not have wished anyone but herself to see, and among them must have been those which contained the first news of, and comments on, the removal.



To Bath they went and they remained in that region until Mr. Austen's death in 1805. Summer visits were paid to Sidmouth, Dawlish, Teignmouth and Lyme Regis. It was on one of these visits, when Jane was about seven and twenty, that they met the man of whom Cassandra spoke to Caroline. Upon Mr. Austen's death the widow and her daughters removed to Southampton. But of these years we know little for scarcely any letters remain. Perhaps the sisters were not often apart during that time so that few were written. Most of those that were came in for Cassandra's blue pencil. The regular picture of their life which the letters supply does not begin again until after the move to Southampton, and Jane, some time later, writes of the relief with which she escaped from Bath.

There is, therefore, some evidence to show that during these years she was not happy, and little to tell us why. Also, for the first time in her life, she could not write. The hidden citadel had refused to transplant itself. It is a clear case of could not, rather than would not, because she did attempt a novel, *The Watsons*, probably about 1804. After a few chapters she abandoned it, nor did she ever take it up again though it suggests a most promising plot. Many ingenious reasons have been put forward to account for this; but the most probable explanation is there, for anyone to see, in the whole texture of the writing. Compared with any of her other books it is like a landscape seen without sunshine. It was, no doubt, a first draft and would have been polished had she finished the book. But no polish could have added that which is missing; the sunshine would have been there from the start or never. It was written wearily, with an effort, and the impetus failed.

It must by no means be taken for granted, however, that she could not write because she was unhappy. She may have been unhappy because she could not write. One of those apparently sterile periods may have been due which occur in every artist's life, intervals of bewilderment and frustration when he feels that he has lost his way and will never work again. For four years, from 1796 to 1800, she had been working at an extraordinary pace and with intense concentration. It may be that she had, for a time, written herself out, in which case she might have been equally miserable had she remained at Steventon.

At Southampton they stayed until 1809, and then they moved to more congenial surroundings. Edward offered his mother and sisters a choice of houses: a cottage near Godmersham, or one on his estate at Chawton in Hampshire. They chose Chawton and, in country surroundings, Jane Austen was able to write again. During five years she produced three more novels: *Mansfield Park*, 1811-13; *Emma*, 1814-15, and *Persuasion*, 1815-16. And

there were the three earlier books to arrange for publication, for at last she was getting into print. Her brother Henry, in a biographical preface to *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* published after her death, describes her doubts and hesitations.

It was with extreme difficulty that her friends, whose partiality she suspected whilst she honoured their judgement, could prevail on her to publish her first work. Nay, so persuaded was she that its sale would not repay the expense of publication, that she actually made a reserve from her very moderate income to meet the expected loss. She could scarcely believe what she termed her great good fortune when *Sense and Sensibility* produced a clear profit of £150.

*Sense and Sensibility*, by A Lady, appeared in 1811. *Pride and Prejudice* followed in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, *Emma* in 1816, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1818. Her name was never published and very few people outside the family circle ever knew who she was.

The books had a mild success. There was no enthusiasm but some people liked them, and since she had expected nothing she was pleased with any praise and money which came her way. The critics took no particular notice of her. By Fanny Burney standards she was a failure. No Dr. Johnson took her to his heart. She remained entirely out of touch with the literary world; never met, never corresponded with any other writer. Indeed, it is probable that she never in her life met anyone who was at all her equal in talent or achievement. She is said to have been diffident and shy in company and she would, no doubt, have found celebrity uncomfortable. But she might well have enjoyed the contact with men of letters which a more spectacular success might have won for her. Several of her most distinguished contemporaries admired her work very much indeed, but she never knew of it. Southey, after her death, wrote:

Her novels are more true to nature, and have, for my sympathies, passages of finer feeling than any others of this age. . . . I regret not having had an opportunity of testifying to her the respect which I felt for her.

And Scott, for whom she had the deepest veneration, went further:

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the

most wonderful I ever met with. The big Bow-Wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment is denied to me.

It is a pity she never heard this. Had they known she was to die so soon perhaps they would have made an opportunity, or would have written to her. But she was young; they must have supposed that she would have a long and increasingly successful career and that they would meet her some day at Holland House.

One little feather in her cap she did achieve. Mr. Clarke, the librarian at Carlton House, informed her that the Prince Regent greatly admired her books and intimated that she might dedicate the next one to His Royal Highness. *Emma* was, at that time, nearing completion and was forthwith offered up to the First Gentleman in Europe. Mr. Clarke went further. He offered her a good deal of advice and suggested that she should attempt “an historical romance illustrative of the august House of Cobourg.” She replied that if her life depended upon her ability to write a romance she would certainly be hung before she finished the first chapter.

Royal favour was the undoing of Fanny Burney. If Jane Austen missed the sweets of success and fame she also escaped their perils. She wrote for the pleasure of writing, and that pleasure was the greatest reward she was ever destined to receive.

Life at Chawton very closely resembled life at Steventon, save that she was now in her thirties. There were the visits to Kent and all the small sociabilities of a country neighbourhood. Nephews and nieces were growing up and developing problems of their own. Edward’s children were of especial interest, since their mother had died in 1808; in one of them, Fanny, she found, as she said, almost another sister, upon whose youthful love affairs she was constantly consulted. Another niece, Anna, took to writing novels and sent manuscripts for criticism. Aunt Cassandra and Aunt Jane, in their unfashionable caps, were now established figures in the life of a new generation. They played country dances by the hour and accompanied children to the dentist. As chaperones at balls they had a comfortable seat by the fire and might drink as much wine as they liked. It all seemed as though it might go on for ever.

But in 1816 Jane's health began to fail. She sank slowly and refused, for many months, the privileges of an invalid. She began a new novel, *Sanditon*, in which she gets great fun out of hypochondriacs. Only a fragment remains, too rudimentary to indicate anything save her courage.

In May 1817 she removed with Cassandra to Winchester in order to consult a doctor there. They took lodgings in College Street, in the little house which still bears a plaque to commemorate her. Nothing could be done. At Chawton, at Godmersham, the light of hope sank as letter after hopeless letter came from Cassandra. By the end of June, all knew that she was dying.

She died as she had lived, quietly, courageously, her heart full of affection for those around her and her soul intent upon its task. Henry and James were with her and she asked them to give her the Sacrament in good time, while she was still sensible and able to concentrate her mind. After a few hours of inexpressible suffering she died in Cassandra's arms, on the 18th of July. Very early in the morning on the 24th, her brothers carried her to her grave in Winchester Cathedral. Cassandra, who watched her go, wrote to Fanny:

Everything was conducted with the greatest tranquillity, and but that I was determined I would see the last, and therefore was upon the listen, I should not have known when they left the house. I watched the little mournful procession the length of the street; and when it turned from my sight, and I had lost her for ever, even then I was not overpowered.

Cassandra needed all her courage, for it was her lot to live on for a long time, alone with her memories of the sister who had been her joy and her support, of the young lover buried in San Domingo. She nursed her aged mother for ten years and died in 1845, at the age of seventy-two. She had no great gifts. She hovers, a shadowy confidante, in the background of the story. Very few of her letters have been preserved. But in this one, with its simplicity, its dignity, its selfless sorrow, she steps forward and takes her place at her sister's side, her equal in that fortitude which is "admired by gods and by men."

## CHAPTER III

# THE LETTERS

The buttons seem expensive—are expensive, I might have said, for the fact is plain enough.—Jane Austen to Cassandra, 18th April 1811.

**I**N death, as in life, she belonged to her family. There is no way of seeing her save as her family saw her, no close description save by a near relative, no intimate letters to anybody outside the clan.

They had the first claim in more ways than one. They appreciated her; they recognised her true worth before the world did. Her nephew wrote of the condescending praise from neighbours to which the Austens must meekly listen:

. . . If they had known that we, in our secret thoughts, classed her with Madame D'Arblay or Miss Edgeworth, or even with some other novel writers of the day whose names are now scarcely remembered, they would have considered it an amusing instance of family conceit.

Everything they tell us of her convinces us that a woman so warmly loved must indeed have been lovable. It is not their fault that they could only describe a sister or an aunt.

It is therefore with an impatient hope of at last knowing Jane Austen herself that we turn to the letters, those ninety-odd letters to Cassandra, written between 1796 and 1816, which Cassandra kept and left to Fanny.

They are most interesting records of life in those days. They are often witty and amusing. But of the writer they tell us nothing which we do not already know. They are informative only in their silences.

Cassandra probably destroyed all those which might have completed the portrait. She burnt any which she thought that her sister might not have wished others to see, and when she did so she was not thinking of the British public in a hundred years' time; it could not have occurred to her that the day would ever come when the great world would feel any interest in the details of this quiet life. She must have been thinking of the Austen clan in

1820, so that it is probable that the destroyed letters contained just those things which brothers, nephews and nieces never knew.

There is a remarkable absence of criticism towards anyone in the family. Scarcely a breath of it is heard, save in one comparison of the bedroom habits of the two sisters-in-law, when lying in. Mary is sluttish and untidy and has no proper dressing-gown. Elizabeth is “really a pretty object with her nice clean cap put on so tidily and her dress so uniformly white and orderly.” One would think that no criticisms were ever made, if it were not for brief references to sharp remarks which have evidently been made in censored letters. All that remain are documents which could be, and probably were, handed round the whole family circle. It is a habit with large families to treat letters and news as common property. Cassandra and Jane might have established the right to a private correspondence but this was by no means a general precedent. Fanny, when writing to consult her aunt about a love affair, is exhorted to write, in her next letter, “*something* which may do to be told or read.”

The very intimacy between the sisters creates a difficulty; they understood each other too well and could leave at least half of anything unsaid. Had she written to a friend outside the circle she might often have been more explicit. In 1813 she was taken to visit a gaol “and went through all the feelings which people must go through, I think, in visiting such a building.” This is tantalising. Cassandra would have known what feelings these were likely to be.

If these letters could only have been edited by somebody who knew the writer personally, many points of extreme interest might have been explained. But it was not to be, thanks to Fanny.

This Fanny, this favourite niece, went up in the world as she grew older. She married Sir Edward Knatchbull and her son was created first Baron Brabourne. There are indications that in later life she was inclined to adopt Sir Walter Elliot’s views on parsons and would have agreed with Mr. Bingley’s sisters that an attorney in the family is a bad joke. She did not much care to remember anything that happened before her Papa went into Kent and became Mr. Knight of Godmersham. Evidence of this is to be found in her behaviour, and in a letter which she wrote in middle age to a younger sister and which was published in the *Cornhill*, No. 973, Winter 1947-48. In it she confesses to some disparaging truths about Aunt Cassandra and Aunt Jane. They were not refined, apparently because they were *not rich*, most of their friends were nobodies, and they were ignorant of the world of fashion. It is implied that their brother’s ascent into the

landed gentry brought them into well-bred society, and Jane had the wit to perceive the superiority of the Godmersham circle, and the address to correct her own manners. But no such adaptability is allowed to Cassandra and it may well be that the countrified old lady, with her quaint caps, her old-fashioned phrases such as “coze,” “Upon the listen,” and “tea is bringing in,” may have become an embarrassment to her elegant Victorian niece.

Not nearly so much of an embarrassment, however, as Aunt Jane who, though in her grave, threatened to bring a most unwelcome limelight upon Steventon, the pupils, and the attorney uncle at Tonbridge. When Edward Austen Leigh, in the ‘sixties, decided to write a *Memoir* on his famous aunt, he asked his cousin Fanny for permission to use these letters which had, he knew, come into her possession when Cassandra died in 1845. He did not get it. He never even had a chance to read the letters. He was told that they were mislaid, that Lady Knatchbull was ill and in no fit state to allow of a search being made. She remained in no fit state until her death in 1882, when her son, Lord Brabourne, discovered and promptly published them. He had known nothing of the earlier request; he was a warm admirer of his great-aunt Jane and, had he known, might have been inconveniently eager to look for them.

He did his diligent and conscientious best to edit and explain every allusion, but by that time everybody who had known Jane Austen personally was dead. Nor was he quite the man for the job. His great-aunt herself could not have devised anything funnier than his solemn apologies for her “playfulness,” and his explanations of such statements as: “Mr. Richard Harvey’s match is put off till he has got a better Christian name,” or “Captain John Gore, commanded by the *Triton*.”

There is no doubt that the Kentish connection did a great deal for Jane Austen. She had a great affection for Edward’s wife, Elizabeth, and seems to have been fond of all the people at Goodnestone. Her visits to Kent widened her knowledge of the world, and it is possible that she picked up there a polish which was lacking at Steventon. Cassandra’s blue pencil prevents us from knowing whether all the people in Kent were equally to be admired and imitated. Kent, in the novels, is the terrain of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

And there are a few slight indications that Godmersham may have furnished raw material for *Mansfield Park*. “Habits of luxury,” developed by the nephews as they grew older, alarm and irritate her. There are even premonitions of the incipient Lady Knatchbull in her cherished Fanny; to some criticism from the sharper-tongued Cassandra she replies with a

wistful hope that Fanny may not turn out “good for nothing” for a great while yet.

To search through these letters for any trace of the novels is a most disheartening task. It is not merely that the books themselves are scarcely ever mentioned; there is so little trace of the material from which the books were made. We feel as some archaeologist might, who comes upon some large and promising mass of fragments buried under a lost city once famous for its art, and finds that they are all shards of coarse kitchen ware; that every trace of sculpture, urns, tiles, tablets and inscriptions has been scrupulously removed. It is with gratitude that we identify a few cooking pots. There is a Moor Park apricot tree at Chawton; we remember one at Mansfield Parsonage. Isabella Thorpe advised Catherine Morland to read *The Midnight Bell*; here is Mr. Austen reading it at an inn.

Very, very seldom do we catch the lustre of a finer glaze. In 1808 there is the “sad story of Mrs. P.” of which Godmersham had got a hint from a gossip paragraph in the *Courier*, in which initials had been used and a certain Lord S. had been implicated. Fanny’s discovery of her cousin’s disgrace, in *Mansfield Park*, by just such a medium, is a major, not a minor, incident. But the *glaze*, that which makes it a treasure, is in Jane Austen’s comment, a comment which she would never have made in a book, never have made, perhaps, to anyone save Cassandra. It throws light upon the nature of Fanny’s “sick feelings.”

I should not have suspected her of such a thing. She stayed the  
Sacramento, I remember, the last time you and I did.

But one thing does become clear, as we sort over these disappointing fragments, and rummage among the bonnets, the buttons, the black butter, Fanny’s cold, Mary’s baby, a brace of pheasants from Kintbury, a match between Mr. Woodward and Miss Rowe, and *Don Juan* at Covent Garden “whom we left in hell at half-past eleven.” The heap is divided into two quite distinct periods: pre-Bath and post-Bath. No mere lapse of time can account for the difference in texture between the two. The fragments may look alike at a first glance but they are baked from two different kinds of clay.

The pre-Bath letters were written by a girl with an enormous capacity for enjoying life. Her high spirits dance through every line. She can cry with joy at a sailor brother’s promotion. She prefers that people should not be too agreeable, as it saves her the trouble of liking them very much in a world



which is full of things to like. She shares a bed with another girl and they lie awake, gossiping and giggling, until two o'clock in the morning. Even disagreeable things are funny. The horrid hot weather "keeps one in a continual state of inelegance." A dull party can be turned to burlesque: "Rice and Lucy made love, Mat. Robinson fell asleep, James and Mrs. Augusta alternately read Dr. Finnis' pamphlet on the cow pox, and I bestowed my company by turns on all." Boring people cannot quench her: "I had the comfort of finding out the other evening who all the fat girls with long noses were that disturbed me at the last H. Ball. They all prove to be Miss Atkinsons."

It is obviously only with an effort that she keeps a straight face while dosing her mother. A great deal of medicine is administered to Mrs. Austen during twenty years and she must have been a tiresome woman. But, though she is never mentioned with affection, she is always treated with respect, even when she is advised to try calomel, not cupping, for a strange sensation as though a peck loaf were resting on the top of her head.

For other tiresome people there is small mercy although, if they die, she sometimes announces that she is "feeling away" on behalf of their relatives. This girl, for all her charm, is a little hard-hearted. A stillborn child is a joke, because the mother had a fright and perhaps, unawares, had looked at her husband. An acquaintance is encountered "in such very deep mourning that either his mother, his wife or himself must be dead."

The pre-Bath letters end with a glimpse of her as she rallies herself to face the removal from Steventon. She is showing courage. What else she may have shown in the missing letters we do not know. In the first that remains, after her father's announcement, she declares that she is much more reconciled to the idea, and she outlines a plan for keeping a domestic staff contented, which she has not ventured to confide to Mr. Austen. "We plan having a steady cook and a young, giddy housemaid, with a sedate, middle-aged man, who is to undertake the double office of husband to the former and sweetheart to the latter. No children, of course, to be allowed on either side." And then, after one or two letters describing the removal, the long silence descends. We never meet this girl again.

In Southampton, in 1805, we meet a woman of thirty; and of her character, tastes and feelings we have far fewer indications. The subject-matter of the letters is the same but the writer has changed profoundly. There

is, of course, the same wit, but the laughter has subsided. She writes, now, to amuse Cassandra rather than to amuse herself.

Some change is only natural to maturity. She is kinder. She no longer thanks people for not making her like them too much. She is glad to like them and makes a note of it when she does, often giving her reasons: they are conversible, they appreciate Crabbe as they ought, they speak warmly of Milton. She feels it to be a great blessing when she meets anybody who cares, or who is able, to discuss subjects which interest her. It does not happen often.

And to tiresome people she has grown more merciful. Of a difficult old spinster she can reflect that “at her age, perhaps, one may be as friendless oneself, and in similar circumstances quite as captious.”

But in the early letters we could see her; she was always somehow part of the scenes which she sketched. Now we cannot, even when she deliberately describes herself:

My head-dress was a bugle band like the border to my gown, and a flower of Mrs. Tilson's. I depended upon hearing something of the evening from Mr. W.K. and am very well satisfied with his notice of me—“a pleasing looking young woman”—that must do; one cannot pretend to anything better now; thankful to have it continued a few years longer.

She may pretend to herself that she accepts Mr. W.K.'s verdict, but behind her resignation we can hear a protest like that of the little old woman in the nursery rhyme: *Lawk a mercy on me! This is none of I!*

And increasingly, as the years roll on, do we feel of the letters that: This is none of I! This is a family bulletin, “something that may do to be read or told,” entertaining but perfunctory, cheerful with the disciplined, selfless merriment of a nun of Community Recreation. She is really a little absent from it all, near as ever to Cassandra, no doubt, but in her heart remote from the scenes in which she moves with such tranquillity. Very seldom does she flash out into vivid feeling so that we can see her as an actress on the stage. Only when some urgent call has been made upon her does it happen.

Such a call comes on the death of her sister-in-law, Elizabeth. Two little motherless nephews are sent for a while from school to Southampton to be comforted by their grandmother and their aunt Jane. They arrive, cold and forlorn, on the top of the coach, wrapped in a great-coat which the kind coachman has given them from among his many. And in her account of

them, though she says nothing of herself, she emerges with touching clarity; tender, sensitive, imaginative and adroit. She knows by instinct when to let them cry and when to introduce a diversion. Her resources are endless: bilbocatch, spillikens, riddles and conundrums, speculation, trips on the river, a visit to a battleship, and a cannonade of a paper fleet with chestnuts especially brought from Steventon. And there is always a respect for their feelings which extends to buying them the black pantaloons which they demand, though she does not think it necessary. To her they are individuals, not babies to be consoled with petting. She has no desire to minimise their loss in their own eyes, or to diminish the dignity of experience, even for children.

Some mention occurs, from time to time, of books published and comments thereon. But of the work in progress never a word. In a life which made many demands upon her hands and feet she found no distracting claimants for her head and heart and could keep them intact for *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. She could put all that she had and was into them while her deputy, a pleasing-looking young woman in a bugle head-dress, went through the day's work, measured out the laudanum drops for her mother, bought Wedgwood china, and listened to the "sharp, hasty screams" of nieces at the dentist.

Everybody who knew her described her as a happy woman. She said herself that she was. Yet there is an undefinable, haunting sadness about the letters, when all have been read. *They* are not sad. It is the reader who sighs and wonders why he does so.

Is it because any great achievement, when closely examined, appals us by its cost? Miss Mitford said that she would cut off her right hand to be able to write like Jane Austen. Many of her successors have doubtless felt the same. But a right hand is no great matter. Much more than that went into her books, more than most of us would be willing to exchange for any pen that ever wrote.

Or is it because we have forgotten the books, and sigh for one who had so much to give to life and of whom life asked so little?

## CHAPTER IV

# THE NOVELS—FIRST PERIOD, 1796-1799

“. . . Intricate characters are the most amusing. They have at least that advantage.”

“The country,” said Darcy, “can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.”

“But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever.”

“Yes, indeed,” cried Mrs. Bennet, offended by his manner of mentioning a country neighbourhood. “I assure you there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in town.”—*Pride and Prejudice*.

**E**VERY young artist must spend some time feeling about for his medium, for his own particular style and way of saying whatever it is that he has to say. And if the form most popular among his contemporaries does not happen to suit his subject-matter he may make some wide first shots.

Novels in letter form had been in vogue ever since Richardson invented that way of telling a story. Fanny Burney adopted it and so did a crowd of smaller fry. For Jane Austen no form could have been more inopportune. It gave no scope for the wit of her narrative style, and it involved the sacrifice either of dialogue or of realism. No realistic letters could possibly contain the pages of accurately reported dialogue which occur in Richardson and Burney.

We find her wrestling with this problem in *Lady Susan*, her first attempt at a serious novel. It defeats her, and the book is of little value save to other writers, to whom it illustrates a problem in technique. It shows how completely the wrong medium could cripple her genius. In an attempt at realism she cuts out dialogue, which was to be one of her greatest accomplishments. The result is a singularly lifeless story. Nor has she very much to say. She probably wrote it when she was about eighteen years old, and she gets little further than a “good idea,” that bane of every artist. The theme is the rivalry between a mature woman of overwhelming charm but no scruples and her sixteen-year-old daughter, who has sterling worth but no advantage of manner. Youth wins the battle. It is the sort of story which would have suited Henry James, one of those cynical, worldly books which many schoolgirls attempt but which are better left to middle-aged men who

have no *partis pris* for youth. It serves to assure us that she was once a schoolgirl and that she had her years of apprenticeship.

At twenty-one she has served her term. She knows what she wants to say. She has discovered how to say it. *First Impressions*, afterwards called *Pride and Prejudice*, is written with all the fresh exhilaration of that discovery. It has faults which are to disappear in the later books, but never again is she to write with quite the same vitality and high spirits as she does in this first spring of her powers. They give it a quality which makes very many of her readers choose it as their favourite.

We are told that it was extensively polished, corrected and revised between 1796 and 1813, when it was published. But its great merit must have been inherent in the first draft, since characters spring to life at once or never, and truth is one of the things which cannot be “put in afterwards.”

The story itself turns upon a stock eighteenth-century plot—a misunderstanding about character. A good man is supposed to be bad and a bad man good. Discoveries about the real characters of the protagonists form the *dénouements* of many plays as well as novels throughout the century. Joseph Surface is exposed and Charles exonerated; Squire Burchell is no longer blamed for the depravities of Squire Thornhill. But the plot is of minor importance. The book lives and moves in the character of Elizabeth Bennet.

To create an entirely charming girl is one of the rarest achievements in fiction. Very few novelists have ever been able to do it. Tolstoy, who could do everything, gave us Natasha. But how many others are there? Dozens, we say, until we have really tried to count them. And then it appears that downright charmers are extremely rare. Noble girls abound, and good girls, tragic, pathetic and touching girls; quiet, steady and constant girls—we love them, esteem them and weep over them—but very seldom do we feel them to be as charming as the girl who lives next door but one, of whom we occasionally catch sight when she takes her dog for a walk. For in real life there are plenty of them; they are always flitting past us. But the “lovely April of her prime” is one of the hardest things for a writer to catch. It is gone so soon.

That a girl of twenty-one should have caught it is one of the most amazing feats of literature. The creator was herself in her April and knew no more of its evanescence than did her creature. Yet she conveys it with an air of effortless mastery which makes it seem easy, so that we accept it with far

too little astonishment. Elizabeth has wit, sense, honesty and a warm heart; but it is not these which capture us, it is her *time of life* which gives to all these attractions such a sparkling freshness.

Her social position, like that of most Austen heroines, is so-so. She is well connected but her future is not secure. On her father's side she belongs to the landed gentry, on her mother's to the underworld of attorneys and tradesmen. The future of the five Miss Bennets must have been a standing topic for speculation in Meryton long before Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst came into Hertfordshire. Upon which side of the fence would they marry?

“I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it.”

“I think I have heard you say, that their uncle is an attorney in Meryton.”

“Yes; and they have another, who lives somewhere near Cheapside.”

“That is capital,” added her sister, and they both laughed heartily.

The embarrassment of low connections was no new circumstance in the life of a heroine. Fanny Burney's Evelina suffered from the Branghtons who were always turning up at the wrong moment and saying the wrong things. But there are subtleties in *Pride and Prejudice* which give a new twist to the comedy of manners. The uncle who lives somewhere near Cheapside, Mr. Gardiner, is the best-bred man in the book. He and his delightful wife understand and sympathise with Elizabeth as neither of her parents do, and it is with quiet satisfaction that she introduces them to Mr. Darcy.

All the material for this kind of comedy lay, as we have seen, ready to Miss Austen's hand. The attorney great-uncle at Tonbridge and the brother at Godmersham had, between them, set the stage for her. But in bringing Fitzwilliam Darcy upon it she introduces a figure which must have been almost as rare in the ballrooms of Kent as in those of Hampshire. He is shown to us, from the very first, as being several cuts above the average country squire. He is reputed to have ten thousand a year, large estates in Derbyshire, a house in town and titled relations. He is the best-born of all the Austen heroes, and, in a Burney novel, he would have been the best-mannered. But his behaviour, on his first appearance, is so appallingly

insolent that few readers can entirely forgive him for it, and it is doubtful if Meryton could ever have learnt to make excuses for a man who slighted the whole neighbourhood; refusing to dance and declaring audibly that none of the women present were handsome enough for him. "He walked here, and he walked there," complains Mrs. Bennet, with unusual accuracy, to her husband, "fancying himself so very great. I wish you had been there, my dear, to have given him one of your set-downs."

The wish to see Mr. Darcy get a set-down is planted, at once and strongly, not only in Mrs. Bennet but in the reader. The great art, the consummate skill, of the book lies in the fact that this wish is satisfied, that we see him brought low, feel he deserves it, and are yet led on to like him and to feel tolerably resigned when he gets Elizabeth too, before the story is finished. Few readers have felt that he was quite good enough for her, but that which would have seemed incredible in the opening chapters becomes in time not merely credible but almost desirable.

The first half of the book builds up, step by step, to the great scene in Hunsford parsonage, where he lays his proud heart at her feet and learns what she thinks of him. When he has gone, she sits down and cries for half an hour, not satisfied, not relieved at having spoken her mind and vented her anger, but aware already of some terrible mistake. Nothing has, as yet, been said to clear up the mist of her prejudice against him. She still believes him to be not merely ill-mannered but ill-natured, a mean, vindictive, dishonourable scoundrel. And the reader knows no more than she of what could be said upon the other side. But she knows, and we know, that, whatever he may be, whatever he has done, this set-down has not been the triumph it should have been. He genuinely loves her, and a sincere declaration of love ought not to be received with insult.

She is not, by nature, a cruel girl. She is kind-hearted and courteous. We have already seen her refusing the oafish Collins, who clearly did *not* love her, in terms most scrupulously worded so as to spare any feelings he might be supposed to have. It is only to Darcy that she cannot be just, cannot be gentle. Her animus against him has been fed by too many tributary streams. The original slight to herself might quickly have been forgotten; we have seen her beginning to forget it during her visit to Netherfield when she was nursing Jane. But then upon the scene appear the attractive Wickham and the fantastic Collins, both of them protégés of the Darcy family, and each with his particular contribution to the prejudiced picture which is forming in her mind. She contrasts the fawning servility which has recommended Collins to a good living with the sturdy independence which has, by his own account,

deprived Wickham of similar advancement. Darcy's active participation in the separation of Jane and Bingley follows. And her contempt for the whole arrogant set reaches its climax when she goes to Hunsford and meets Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in an atmosphere which very nearly takes us back to the days of Fielding.

All her bitterness and irritation are let loose when poor Darcy makes his ill-worded application. He is castigated, not merely for his own sins but for the sins of the Bingleys and the de Bourghs, for Jane's wounded heart and for Charlotte Collins, kept standing in the cold wind by her own garden gate until her patroness chooses to drive on. Elizabeth completely loses her temper, says everything she can think of to mortify and humiliate him, betrays Jane's secret, and repeats statements which have been made to her in confidence by Mr. Wickham. Had he been as bad as she thought him he would still have scarcely deserved the broadside to which he was treated.

His feeling for her, however, is stronger than his pride or her prejudice. And it is the strength of this feeling which triumphs and which makes the second half of the book as exciting as the first. In her tirade she has mentioned Wickham. He suspects a preference. Had pride won the day he would have held his tongue, let her marry Wickham and be miserable. It is entirely against his nature to explain or to justify himself, but he finds that her happiness is paramount, however badly she may have behaved. He cannot allow her to make so terrible a mistake when a few words from himself might open her eyes to Wickham's real character. So he writes to her, an angry letter, begun in bitterness and mortification, but ending with an involuntary "God bless you." And by this letter he opens the whole train of circumstances leading to their eventual reconciliation and happiness.

Warm feeling is ever the good angel in Miss Austen's stories. Her characters are at their best when advised by their hearts, and most of their errors come from their heads. Darcy's faults arose from a mistaken idea of his own consequence; he has not quite got rid of it by the end of the book, but there are indications that he will do so as soon as he has learnt to be laughed at.

It is not an elaborate story. Had it all happened to another girl it would have been a mildly pleasant story. Since it happens to Elizabeth it is a delightful story.

Countless readers have fallen in love with her for more than a hundred and thirty years. To her creator she was a lifelong joy. The warmth and pleasure of her companionship did not end when the book was finished. At



picture exhibitions in London Miss Austen was always on the look-out for a portrait which might be worthy of Mrs. D. She found one of Mrs. Bingley, in a white gown with green ornaments, and she hoped that Sir Joshua Reynolds might give her Mrs. D. in yellow. But he failed her and she could “only imagine that Mr. D. prizes any picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye.”

The book has faults. Darcy exists only to play in scenes with Elizabeth. He is real and convincing but we do not know quite enough about him; some scene with his aunt would have established him more firmly and he would have got one, probably, in a later book. Also his extreme insolence, at the first Meryton ball, does not quite match his later behaviour. It goes too far, though it is doubtless authentic. Miss Austen may well have met some young patrician at a ball who behaved like that, may, for all we know, have got the germ of her story from such an incident; but “Nature is the enemy of Art,” and it is one of the functions of Art to make Nature credible. Nor can we believe that rude young men of good family, met at balls, turned out later to be as amiable as was Fitzwilliam Darcy.

There is some want of skill in the minor characters. Mary, the provincial bluestocking, is carelessly done; she is not even very funny. Kitty is better managed; her complete insignificance is so well relieved by the untimeliness of her coughing fits.

There are two relics of the Little Character Monger period, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. They are so very entertaining that it is ungrateful to carp at them, and they show what she could do in that line. But they have strayed in from another book and they are not quite worthy to be in a supporting cast with Elizabeth. This is particularly apparent in her scenes alone with them, when Mr. Collins proposes, and in the final tussle with Lady Catherine. Elizabeth becomes a little less real when she is talking to them. She is three-dimensional and they are not. They put over character lines to which she must reply like a human being, and her own speeches become, in consequence, a little stilted. Later in life Miss Austen would have known how to make them quite as ridiculous without allowing them to create this awkwardness. Millions of readers have probably been very well satisfied with them as they are. But *she* was not. Elizabeth had committed her to a path which led up to the very top of the hill.

Another stock theme of the period was a satire upon the silly girl who gets all her ideas of life from books. It was a theme which attracted Jane

Austen so much that she used it for her next two novels. But Marianne Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility*, is no Lydia Languish, and the crop of her illusions is not raised upon the common soil of the circulating library. Her nonsense is exalted and delicate and its source is poetry. Nor is she merely a silly girl. She has some of the uncompromising nobility of Alceste in *Le Misanthrope*. She recognises no authority higher than that of the feelings, by which she believes that people should be entirely governed. She supposes that all the feelings must be good and does not reckon with bad ones at all. Nor does she observe any duty that has not an emotional sanction. She will do anything for those whom she loves, but the small obligations of social life do not exist for her. If she wishes to talk she does so, with complete unreserve. If she prefers to be silent she sits mute. She will not be civil to people whom she does not like; she would rather be rude than insincere. Nor does she always consider the convenience of those whom she does like. When her sister Elinor is cruelly slighted at an evening party, Marianne's idea of support is to throw her arms round Elinor's neck and burst into tears, exclaiming: "Don't mind them. Don't let them make *you* unhappy."

She nearly breaks her heart over Willoughby because he, too, wears the livery of the feelings, and she will not allow that Colonel Brandon can have any feelings at all because he wears a flannel waistcoat. When Willoughby deserts her she makes no attempt to endure the blow; she does her best to pine away and die, regardless of the misery which this will bring upon her family. But in the end she recovers, acquires some sense, and marries Colonel Brandon.

Willoughby is not a designing scoundrel like Wickham. He is really governed by the feelings. When Eliza Williams, an unprotected girl of sixteen, rouses his passions by falling in love with him, he immediately yields to them, seduces her, and abandons her as soon as they have subsided. He finds that his feelings for Marianne are not strong enough to make him prefer poverty with her to affluence with another woman, and he knows of no other tie which might bind him to her. The strongest emotion he knows is that of self-pity when he discovers that his feelings can be painful, and we leave him in a fair way to dispensing with them altogether.

Colonel Brandon conceals beneath his unfortunate waistcoat a heart which would have won Marianne's utmost approval, had she read of it in a book. His whole life has been influenced by a hopeless passion for his brother's wife, an exalted, selfless love which has involved him in many delicate and interesting situations and plunged him for years into a most

authentic melancholy. But such stories are not laid out on the counter for the approbation of Sensibility. If told at all they are confided to Sense, for some practical reason. It is Elinor, not Marianne, who first hears about all this.

Elinor, as Sense, suffers a little from too close an adherence to a thesis. Her story has less drama because she does not change or learn anything in the course of the book. Also, she is not a complete contrast. She is not governed by sense as is her sister by sensibility. She is governed by her principles and uses her sense to discover how to apply them.

For sense is not a moral quality; unscrupulous people often possess a great deal of it, and it can be as useful to self-interest as it is to altruism. It could well be said that Elinor does not conduct her own affairs very sensibly. She learns that her lover, Edward Ferrars, has been entrapped into an engagement by the intriguing, shallow-hearted Lucy Steele. Lucy confides this in the hope of warning a rival off the course at a time when neither of them supposes that the knowledge may put her into Elinor's power. Had she known that they would all meet later in London, at the house of Edward's mother, she would probably have held her tongue. A hint, dropped casually to the Ferrars family, would have been disastrous for Lucy. But Elinor does not drop it. She goes further. She abets Colonel Brandon in his plan to give Edward a living which shall enable him to marry a woman who will certainly make him miserable.

She does not do this because she is sensible, but because she considers that no happiness can exist without honour. She *must* respect a confidence and Edward *must* keep a promise. Some tension, some struggle between her sense and her principles, would have made her at once more interesting and a better antithesis to Marianne. But sense, in this story, has always got to be on the side of the angels, and Elinor is uniformly consistent.

Nor does Edward help her much, for he is a poor stick. He spends his time sitting about in low spirits, except on those occasions when he has not even the courage to sit. Other people determine his fate for him; his mother bullies him, Lucy traps him and then jilts him for his richer brother, Colonel Brandon supplies him with an income and Elinor marries him.

The minor characters are assembled into three groups: the Ferrars group, the Middleton group and the two Miss Steeles.

The Ferrars group includes John Dashwood, the half-brother of Elinor and Marianne, who has inherited their old home, Norland. His wife was a Ferrars. The keynote of this group is struck at the opening of the book when John is persuaded by his wife that it is his duty to break a promise made to

his dying father that he will provide for the widow and the half-sisters. He realises that he has but one duty, to keep his money for his own children. For the Ferrars family worship money with a religious intensity; they are not simply avaricious, they know no other measure of Good. To acquire and retain money is, in their eyes, *right*, and to spend or give it is *wrong*. This gives them a kind of superb meanness which is highly comic, because they are not in the least ashamed of themselves and are often bewildered by the behaviour of other people.

Sir John Middleton, of Barton Park in Devonshire, is the kindly cousin who offers a refuge to the Dashwood women in a small house near his own. At Barton we are in a rustic, boisterous atmosphere. Lady Middleton tries hard to be genteel but the spirits of Sir John and of her mother, Mrs. Jennings, are too much for her. They are genial, generous people to whom a love affair is as good sport as a fox hunt. Sir John was probably as sure that the fox liked the chase as was Mrs. Jennings that girls like to be joked about their lovers. It is a kind of horseplay from which Jane Austen suffered herself, in Hampshire. Tom Lefroy, the Irish friend with whom she danced so much, was “so excessively laughed at” about her that he dared not call at Steventon.

The Miss Steeles are toadies, both at Barton and in the Ferrars circle. They are cheap, inferior and sly, but this is apparent to neither group. At Barton they are regarded as the equals of the Miss Dashwoods, and from Mrs. Ferrars they receive much more civility. They are as vulgar as the Branghtons in *Evelina*, but they are accepted in supposedly well-bred society, which the Branghtons were not.

The most lovable character in the book is old Mrs. Jennings, who has no pretensions to breeding at all. Her efforts to mend Marianne’s broken heart with a bottle of fine old Constantia wine are very funny, and her own heart is very much in the right place.

This book lacks the vitality and the high spirits of *Pride and Prejudice*. The pitch is lower and no characters are out of key with the whole composition. There are no love scenes, or rather no scenes between lovers (for Miss Austen was always chary of downright love scenes). Colonel Brandon and Willoughby explain themselves to Elinor but not to Marianne, and Edward never explains anything to anybody. This gives a kind of rational chilliness to the story which prevents it from ranking with the others, in spite of its great merit.

Our Authoress (as her brother Henry calls her in his biographical note) had not quite done with the girl who wants life to be like a book. And the book this time was to be the Gothic Thriller, a type of horror story very much in vogue just then. Miss Austen herself was fond of this kind of fiction, though she laughed at it.

“We are now in Margiana,” she wrote on one occasion, “and like it very well indeed. We are just going to set off for Northumberland to be shut up in Widdrington Tower, where there must be two or three sets of victims already immured under a very fine villain.”

Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, is not a silly girl. She is very young, too young to want adventures of the heart. She wants towers full of immured victims, cupboards full of skeletons and midnight churchyards full of gibbering spectres.

In one respect she is unique among the Austen heroines: both her parents are not only alive but adequate. For Jane Austen was rather hard on parents. Where they survive at all they are usually a trial to their daughters. This accounts perhaps for a certain quality in most of these girls which Miss Thackeray described as hardness of heart. This is not quite fair. Hearts so warm cannot be called hard. But they do have a kind of emotional wariness which is often to be observed in motherless girls who have been obliged to keep their own counsel too young, before they are quite ready for independence. Catherine has not got this caution. She is away from home during the greater part of the book, on a visit to Bath and later to the Tilneys at Northanger Abbey; but in the background there is a mother in whom she can confide and on whom she can rely.

Incautious and friendly as a new-hatched chick, Catherine looks round upon a world where everything is wonderful. A dewy freshness lies upon the whole scene and she cannot distinguish romance from reality. The engagement of her brother to a tawdry flirt, Isabella Thorpe, fills her with solemn awe. The thrillers which she gets out of the library seem as real to her as the streets of Bath. An old chest *must* contain secret papers; she rushes to examine it with one arm in the sleeve of her gown and one shoulder bare. An Abbey *must* contain a corpse, preferably the corpse of her host's wife. So simple and open is she that she can neither conceal from Henry Tilney that she has fallen in love with him nor that she rather hopes his father may have murdered his mother.

She is perfectly oblivious of the atmosphere of petty intrigue in which she moves. She does not realise that Isabella is merely playing with James Morland until she can secure a better match. She is unaware of her own reputation as an heiress, which has attracted John Thorpe and is the reason for General Tilney's civility. She ascribes the invitation to the Abbey to pure kindness and sees nothing of the greed which would secure her and her dowry for a younger son. Nor is it the impact of worldly experience which makes her, at last, grow up; it is a maturing of the heart. When the General discovers his mistake and turns her out of his house she goes home, a lamb misused, to discover that she can no longer confide in her mother. Henry has aroused a feeling which goes too deep and makes a woman of her. She maintains a dignified silence until the high-spirited Henry turns up, in defiance of his father, to assure her of his love.

Henry Tilney is the most amusing young man whom we have yet encountered. He is not a great wit, but he is something more than an agreeable rattle. He is early aware that Catherine loves him, but she is so very young and naïve that he scarcely takes it seriously. He finds it delightful to give lessons on the picturesque to a pupil so docile that, after one lesson, she "voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape." She takes his teasing with humble good humour and believes him to be the cleverest man in the world. When he concocts a parody of her favourite thrillers she thinks it better than any original and earnestly begs him to go on. He does not at first want her to grow up.

But a moment comes when he is obliged to stop teasing. Her fantastic suspicions about his mother's death force him to be serious and to speak to her in a tone which he has hitherto been careful to avoid. Kindly and gently he disentangles reality from fiction and commands her to emerge from childhood. She obeys him immediately and their relationship changes. He tries to go back to teasing and cannot. When she learns that Isabella has jilted her brother he suggests that she feels like a young lady in a romance:

"You feel, I suppose, that, in losing Isabella, you lose half yourself; you feel a void in your heart which nothing else can occupy. Society is becoming irksome; and as for the amusements in which you were wont to share at Bath, the very idea of them without her is abhorrent. You would not, for instance, now go to a ball for the world. You feel that you have no longer any friend to whom you can speak with unreserve. . . . You feel all this?"

“No,” said Catherine, after a few moments’ reflection, “I do not—ought I? To say the truth. . . . I do not feel so very, very much afflicted as one would have thought.”

“You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature. Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves.”

Henry’s business was pretty well settled by that conversation. Honesty is a trait common to all Miss Austen’s heroines. They have no little tricks, no artifice in dealing with the men they love. And we are always convinced that they made their husbands very happy.

*Northanger Abbey* is a slighter novel than its predecessors. It has no theme. It is a study of a single girl. Some people find her lovable, others foolish, but nobody can fail to believe in her. At a first glance she might seem commonplace, but a closer examination shows her to possess some remarkable qualities. She has a very rare freedom from any trace of vanity or egotism. Honest humility may be estimable but it is not easy for a novelist to paint it in attractive colours. Combined with such freshness, so sweet a temper, it is here very charming. Her comments on everything, though childishly phrased, are never trite. Her criticism of contemporary history books, for instance, takes a point which might well have been missed by many a conceited bluestocking:

“The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes’ mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.”

The supporting cast is small but perfectly in key with her. There is not a single character which does not contribute to the whole composition. Technically the book is perfect.

## CHAPTER V

# THE NOVELS—SECOND PERIOD, 1811-1816

“I . . . said everything, as you may suppose.”—Miss Bates, in *Emma*.

**B**ETWEEN *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* there was an interval of ten years or more. Such pauses exist in every artist's life, though this is an unusually long one.

*The Watsons*, attempted at Bath in 1804, cannot be criticised as a book because it was never finished, but it is of great interest for the light which it throws upon the trend of Jane Austen's thought during these apparently sterile years. Emma Watson is a fore-runner of Fanny Price. She has been brought up, away from her family, in the refined and comfortable home of an aunt. Her own is very inferior, as she finds when she returns to it. Fanny's return to her family at Portsmouth is merely a visit, an episode, whereas Emma comes home for good. But both are faced with the same problem: what becomes of good-breeding when it is exposed to wind and weather? If a lady sinks to a situation in which she can have no windscreen of consequence, money or privilege, how long can she continue to be a lady? Mr. Austen Leigh thought that the book was abandoned because the answer must be: Not for very long. “The circumstances of the heroine's life,” he says, “endangered her refinement.”

That may possibly be so, but that Jane Austen should have been asking herself these questions at all is something new. As a girl they had never troubled her. One was a lady oneself and one laughed at those who were not, particularly if they lived in a stately home. But how does one come to be a lady? What is true refinement? Can it ever survive without a windscreen?

And towards privilege itself her attitude has changed a little, when she returns to her desk seven years later. What it is and why it is she never asks. The abstract did not interest her and she would have made little of Acton's statement that “all power corrupts.” She was concerned with concrete facts: that people who believe that they have been born superior develop certain marked mental limitations, that people who are never obliged to test their ideas against reality will, in time, become very stupid, and that people who are never called to account for what they do contract a moral astigmatism. All this, coupled with the fact that people so afflicted still complacently



regarded themselves as the Elect, struck her as being very funny. At twenty-one she found it a good joke. At thirty-six, though she still uses this joke as material for comedy, she treats it more thoughtfully.

Her sister-in-law, Elizabeth, dying at Godmersham in 1808, left a large family of motherless children. The Austen aunts did much for these children but the Bridgeses at Goodnestone, who lived nearby, had naturally the chief say in their bringing up. The censorship of the letters leaves only a faint indication of what Chawton thought, but some traces of a deepening anxiety are left, as “sweet little George” and “precious Fanny” grow older. She writes of her nephews “with a little bitterness” in a censored letter and qualifies this later, in one that survives, with the news that they have taken the Sacrament. The old nurse is worried about a village girl, Mary Doe, and confides her anxieties to the Austen aunts. Fanny is defended from the imputation of growing up “good for nothing.”

To laugh at the failings of people in great houses could not have been so pleasant if she felt that these beloved children were in a way to develop the same tendencies. There can be no suggestion that *Mansfield Park* was a portrait of Godmersham. She never drew portraits. But when she wrote it she had before her eyes, and very much in her mind, a group of children growing up in just such a house.

It is the most important of the novels, the most ambitious in theme, and the best example of her powers. She put all that she had into it. As a work of art it heads the list, and if it is not the universal choice, that is because so many people do not ask that a novel should be, primarily, a work of art. Fanny Price is not as attractive as Elizabeth Bennet or as touching as Anne Elliot, and this is enough to make many readers rate the book lower than *Pride and Prejudice* or *Persuasion*. But it is not really about Fanny Price. The subject is in the title: it is about Mansfield Park, the great country house, the home of privilege.

On the surface all is well. Fanny, in exile at Portsmouth, remembers it as a fortress of elegance and propriety:

At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good-sense and good-breeding supplied its place.

The trouble lies below the surface. Sir Thomas Bertram is a man of principle, dignity and considerable culture. He is a Member of Parliament, a good landlord and a generous employer. His household is very much of his own ordering, for his wife is a sleepy, stupid woman who sits on a sofa and makes fringe. He takes great pains over the education of his children; he expects the boys to recite *Hamlet* on winter evenings and visits the schoolroom at regular intervals to examine the girls. Yet three of the five who grow up at Mansfield turn out to be “good for nothing,” as Cassandra would have said; a fourth only just escapes emotional shipwreck, and the fifth survives because she is not a Bertram.

For Sir Thomas, though he does not know it, has a false standard of values. He is blinded and confused by the sense of his own importance. Mansfield, to him, embodies the Good, just as money was the Good to the Ferrars family. So that, although he believes that he is bringing up his children to serve God, he is really more bent upon fitting them to serve Mansfield Park. “How to preserve in the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are” is one of his great preoccupations.

Tom, the elder son, and the girls Maria and Julia find no difficulty in acquiring a consciousness of what they are. In manner and appearance they do him full credit. But of the inner rectitude which is nourished by humility they have not a grain. Edmund, the younger son, is less corrupted by a sense of his own importance, partly because he *is* a younger son, which is a mark against him by Mansfield standards. He is more sensitive and thoughtful than the rest of the tribe, but the power which really preserves him is a very kind heart and strong sympathies which lead him to recognise what other people are.

The fifth child is little Fanny Price, the niece from an indigent home, who has been adopted at nine years old. She is never in danger of supposing herself superior and she gets plenty of lessons in humility. Her danger is all in the other direction; she might grow into a poor relation, plausible, cadging, and full of secret rancour, like her aunt Norris, Lady Bertram’s sister. But she escapes from this, partly by the kindness and sympathy of Edmund, and partly by the great strength of her own character. She strikes root at Mansfield and develops a sturdy little life of her own there, absorbing all its benefits but immune from its blight.

The drama begins when Sir Thomas is obliged to leave England for a visit to the West Indies. Certain tendencies in Tom have already disturbed him but he has great reliance on Edmund’s good sense and upon Mrs. Norris, who has always blinded him by her flattery. In his absence the gale

begins which is to blow Mansfield down about his ears. Two destroying angels arrive in the neighbourhood, a brother and sister who come to stay at Mansfield parsonage; and between them they lose no time demolishing Mansfield Park.

Henry and Mary Crawford are not malign; they do not want to hurt anybody. They are simply themselves, handsome, rich, charming and completely devoid of principle. They have no roots, no sense of responsibility to anyone or anything. They take nothing seriously and they have never encountered idealism. When they do so they are impressed; they do not dismiss it as humbug. Henry falls deeply in love with Fanny, and Mary, rather reluctantly, succumbs to Edmund. They both feel that they have met something very valuable. But to false principles they are deadly. Unencumbered themselves they involve the poor Bertrams in all the ruin of a great edifice that has been founded upon a fallacy.

Edmund, who should have been looking after his sisters, is soon so besotted by Mary that he is ready to swear black is white. Henry turns upon the Miss Bertrams that full battery of charm which he automatically directs at any woman in his orbit. They go down like ninepins. Nothing in their education has armed them against such a man. Any housemaid at the Park, any gamekeeper's daughter, would have known better how to look after herself. But they, believing that homage and admiration are their due, cannot imagine that any man could trifle with a Miss Bertram.

After a while, having turned the sisters into angry rivals, Henry drops Julia and concentrates upon Maria, who is engaged to marry a rich lout, Mr. Rushworth of Sotherton. He sets himself to cut Rushworth out under the noses of two brothers and a couple of duennas, secure that nobody sees what he is doing save the indulgent Mary. Of Fanny's watchful indignation he is quite unaware.

Sir Thomas returns before Maria's engagement is actually broken, and the adroit Henry, who has no intention of committing himself, skips off to Bath. When next he comes to Mansfield Maria has married Rushworth and gone with Julia to London, so that Fanny is the only bird in the covert. The charm is duly turned on her, with no effect. His vanity is stung and he declares his intention of "making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart." He takes much more trouble with her than he ever did with her cousins, but all in vain. At last he falls seriously in love with her.

Now Fanny is brought into conflict with Mansfield Park. For all, Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, even Edmund, think she should marry Crawford.

She is doing wrong, by Mansfield standards, in refusing so advantageous a connection. She cannot explain to the elders why she dislikes him, and Edmund refuses to understand her. But where Mansfield standards clash with her own she will have none of them. She holds out, resists them all, and is sent home in disgrace to visit her out-at-elbows family in Portsmouth.

While she is away Mansfield collapses. Tom Bertram nearly dies of a fever brought on by a fall at Newmarket, too much drinking, and the neglect of his gay companions. Maria meets Henry Crawford again in London and runs away with him. Julia, in a selfish panic, snatches at the first ne'er-do-weel who will escort her to Gretna Green. Edmund's eyes are at last opened to the real character of Mary Crawford and his heart is nearly broken. Fanny is hastily summoned back to Mansfield to console and support her uncle and aunt and eventually to marry Edmund.

Henry, Edmund, Mary and Fanny hold the foreground in this story. Both the men are far more solid, and drawn in greater detail, than any men in the earlier novels. It is true that they are never seen except in the company of women. Miss Austen always left the purely masculine world untouched. But she does tell us a great deal about these two.

Henry is a practised flirt. It is easy to see why most women loved him and why even Fanny, at one point, was very nearly brought over. He has wit, sense and considerable gifts. The address with which he begins his first attack upon Fanny shows his technique with all of them. He can remember nothing about her on his previous visit save that she was very helpful in coaching Mr. Rushworth for the play they were getting up. But he makes the most of this, in the first remarks which he has ever addressed to Fanny, though he has known her for months:

“Your kindness and patience can never be forgotten, your indefatigable patience in trying to make it possible for him to learn his part . . . to mix up an understanding for him out of the superfluity of your own! *He* might not have sense enough himself to estimate your kindness, but I may venture to say that it had honour from all the rest of the party.”

We see him with three women: with Mary, Fanny and Maria. To each of them he is a different man.

With his sister he is his everyday self; lazy, affectionate, ready to consider her in small ways but not to make a home for her at Everingham, his country house. They have no reserves and are tacitly agreed never to

blame one another. Mary applauds, with equal indulgence, his plans to make a small hole in Fanny's heart and his raptures when his own heart has been won.

But he has another self, a dormant self, which awakens when he listens to the adventures of Fanny's sailor brother, William. He wishes that he were not so idle and worthless. He longs for "the glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance." And this side of him is uppermost when his passion for Fanny develops. It does not sway him for very long, but it is genuinely there. He is by no means a completely selfish and cynical young man.

Maria rouses the worst of him—his vanity. He never cares a button for her, never intends to seduce her, but in order to score over Rushworth he uses all the arts of a seducer. He bewilders her judgement and undermines her principles; he constantly tempts her to slight and neglect her betrothed, and to cheapen herself by doing undignified, compromising things. He makes a direct assault upon her senses under cover of the play, *Lovers' Vows*. They are acting mother and son, roles which give Henry an excuse for many caresses to which poor Rushworth cannot object. They are rehearsing when the return of Sir Thomas is announced; Henry has Maria's hand pressed to his heart and he keeps it there much longer than is necessary, through the ensuing moments of confusion and consternation. He knows what he is doing, perfectly well. Maria sits through the rest of the evening in a sensuous reverie, unmoved by her father's return, "still feeling her hand pressed to Henry Crawford's heart and caring little for anything else."

When they meet again in London this vanity flares up. She has, after all, married Rushworth and the world would say she had made a better match. Without in the least wavering in his devotion to Fanny he allows himself a last orgy of mischief and tries once more to see how far he can cut Rushworth out. The experiment saddles him with a mistress for whom he has neither passion, tenderness nor gratitude. A deliberate indiscretion on her part binds him to her; he is compromised, the whole scandal comes out, and he has to go off with her.

Edmund was one of Miss Austen's favourite men. On his first appearance in the story his sensitive kindness to his poor little cousin shows the best of him. For he is rather a forlorn young man, a misfit among the Bertrams. He is solitary and ill at ease, as the aesthete or the intellectual often is among aristocrats. He thinks occasionally, and nobody except Fanny understands a word he says. He likes music, which the rest of the family regard as an accomplishment. He likes looking at scenery instead of

shooting over it. He feels that all is not well with Mansfield but cannot locate the evil. He is destined for the Church, and feels that this calling demands something from him without being quite sure what it is. He is only four and twenty, and is slow in maturing because there really is something in his nature which can ripen. All this makes him rather solemn. He has been called a prig, but that is a little unfair. He is in search of some better repository of the Good than Mansfield Park, and nothing in his upbringing has taught him where to look for it. Had he been a prig he would have been happier, for he would have taken more pride in being singular and more pleasure in his disapproval of the others.

Mary Crawford throws him into a fog of bewildered misery from which he does not emerge until the end of the book. He knows that they are not suited but he is so bewitched that he shuts his eyes and pursues her. Very little is left of poor Edmund when, at last, he is obliged to open them. And the irony of it is that Mary returns his feeling. She came to Mansfield intending to capture Tom, and is astonished at herself for falling in love with a younger son and a parson. But she cannot help it; she loves him. And then, quite inexplicably to her, she loses him. Candidly, seriously, condemning indiscretion while condoning adultery, she had been giving him her views upon the situation of Henry and Maria; and she sees him rush in horror from the room, just because she has not exhibited any "modest loathings."

Fanny, the leading instrument in this quartette, has by far the strongest character of any Austen heroine. Its strength is masked by timidity and diffidence and by the low spirits which cloud much of her life at Mansfield. Before she comes there she has been a busy, bustling little girl, her overworked mother's prime minister, running the Portsmouth home and hopping about with her brother William whenever the old hand organ came down the street. But we do not often see her hopping at Mansfield: only once do we catch her practising her dancing steps up and down the drawing-room floor when her aunt Norris's back is turned. There is much to depress her; she is often snubbed and neglected and she has to watch Edmund's infatuation for Mary Crawford. She learns to be silent and inconspicuous. But her strength is in no way diminished. She holds her own at Mansfield and she holds her own at Portsmouth.

In her own family she finds many circumstances which may endanger her refinement. But she also finds a younger sister who is more congenial to her than either of the Miss Bertrams. At first she is shocked by Susan's manners, but she very soon learns to wonder how this girl, "brought up in the midst of negligence and error, should have formed such proper opinions

of what ought to be.” She learns, in fact, that the desire for refinement is not a hothouse plant and that it will sprout in the most inclement soil. She learns that if a lady must sink she may find people down below with whom she has more in common than with many whom she has left.

Fanny has very great capacities. She feels with painful intensity, she has genuine intellect, a love of natural beauty, and a keen enjoyment of music. She is able to be interested in things as well as people, which is a rare faculty among Jane Austen’s women. The first-rate invariably smites her, and her determined dislike of Crawford cannot prevent her from listening with ecstasy when he reads Shakespeare aloud.

In every way she is of finer grain than Edmund, her guide and mentor. He recommends books to improve her mind: she reads them for pleasure. He tells her the names of the stars: she finds them beautiful. And to her exclamations on the glories of a summer night he can only rejoin, with patronising indulgence: “I like to hear your enthusiasm.” He is pitched in too low a key for her, and it is one of the subtleties of the book that Henry Crawford, had he been a better man, would have been the right man. With him she would have developed her latent capacities more fully and they might have read Shakespeare together for a better reason than self-improvement. With Edmund she secured happiness at a cost, the sacrifice of certain possibilities in her nature. For *Mansfield Park* is not a fairy story.

And its evil genius does not vanish through the floor with a bang. Mrs. Norris is the most odious character in all the novels. She is the worst kind of Poor Relation, fawning on the family, borrowing all the consequence she can from the connection, bullying servants, seething with frustrated egotism, and forever drawing attention to herself. For servants can be impertinent and the family can neglect her. She needs a whipping boy, a dependant like herself, at Mansfield, who will never be able to hit back. That is why she wants Fanny at Mansfield, and why she is determined to keep her there. She wants somebody *at the Park* on whom she can turn, whenever the Bertrams humiliate her, and say: “Remember who and what you are!” On Fanny she can work off all her secret rancour and jealousy of the sister who married a baronet, and the sister who married for love.

Yet her exit is almost tragic. Base as she is she loves the unfortunate Maria, and in the end she gives up everything to share exile with her niece. It is a vain sacrifice, for they make each other miserable. But this heroic gesture on the part of poor Mrs. Norris gives a horrible conviction to all the rest of her. In a fairy story she would not have been permitted to love anybody.

After such an achievement Miss Austen may well have felt herself a little at a loss. It was her *chef d'œuvre*. Could she ever hope to write a better book, unless some miracle of direct inspiration, another Elizabeth Bennet, were vouchsafed to her? And, if not, would she ever write another book?

Her Muse, when consulted, merely smiled and asked for tidings of Emma Woodhouse. For there are indications of a difference of opinion between them over the next story. In vain did the votary explain that her new heroine was to be a Jane Fairfax, a lovely, interesting and accomplished girl who had been brought up away from her family in refinement and comfort and who had returned home in circumstances which . . . (*Have we not heard of this before?*) The circumstances were to be a little town called Highbury, a grandmother and a spinster aunt—gentlewomen who had sunk, narrow lodgings and a gloomy future. Jane was to spend a few months with them before facing the horror of going out as a governess. And she was to be slighted by (*another slighted heroine?*) a rich young lady called Miss Emma Woodhouse who led Highbury society and insulted the spinster aunt. (*Why?*) And then the two girls were to be rivals in love.

But the Muse would take no interest in Jane Fairfax. She continued to ask, with great earnestness, *why* Miss Woodhouse was rude to the aunt.

“That is not important. It is a minor incident.”

“On the contrary it is a major incident. Was not Miss Woodhouse very sorry for it afterwards? Did she not cry all night?”

“If she did, I shall not say so. She is not my heroine. She is the sort of girl I detest. She has an absurd opinion of herself.”

“Still, you know, she learns. These rich young ladies, upon whom you are so determined to be severe, can sometimes be amiable. If amiable, they correct themselves. Miss Woodhouse has an excellent heart which prevails over a faulty education. That, I think, is your subject.”

“But if I take her for my heroine nobody will much like her except myself.”

“What does that signify if *you* like her? The effort to do so may enable you to write a worthy successor to *Mansfield Park*.”

“But what am I to do with Jane Fairfax?”

“Do the best you can with her.”



“She will never stay quietly in the background now. And the insolence to the aunt cannot be a major incident. The aunt is not sufficiently important.”

“Leave that to me. Oblige me by liking Emma and I will send you an aunt.”

“You will send me an aunt? Here have I been, for eighteen years, imploring you for another Elizabeth Bennet, and you promise me a spinster aunt!”

“You are very ungrateful. Not often in a thousand years do I send two gifts to the same person.”

Miss Austen went to her desk and wrote:

“Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich. . . .”

It was well for her that she could not foresee all the consequences of what she was doing. To know that *Emma* would be regarded as a classic in a hundred years' time might have gratified her. But she might have shut up her desk for good had she known that a dramatic critic in an evening paper, in the 1940's, would suggest that “in her day-dreams at the Vicarage the unsophisticated Jane Austen must have imagined herself as the heroine of her novel, *Emma*.”

Miss Woodhouse slights Jane Fairfax because she finds that she cannot patronise her; she does not quite know how to be friends with a girl who is not, socially, her equal. But she is lonely and there is no girl in Highbury quite on her level, so she selects, as a companion, Harriet Smith, a harmless, feather-pated little nobody who is grateful for patronage. And in her attempts to make a lady of Harriet she makes a great goose of herself.

Harriet wants to marry a farmer, but this will never do since the yeomanry are beneath the notice of Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield. She cannot allow her little protégée to sink so low. Mr. Elton, the parson, is unmarried and Harriet will be quite worthy of him when Emma has formed her a little. Harriet, to be sure, is illegitimate, but then parsons are not quite. . . . She sets to work to form Harriet and talks her out of love with the farmer by comparing his manners with those of a true gentleman. Harriet, in the direct way of children and simpletons, understands her a great deal too well, and thinks she is talking of Mr. Knightley, Emma's very old friend. His brother has married Emma's sister, he is the most important landowner in

the place, and he is the only person who ever tells Emma not to make a goose of herself.

This is a poser. Emma cannot very well explain that Mr. Elton is not quite a gentleman though good enough for Harriet. She is driven to praise his manners at the expense of Mr. Knightley's, and to declare that they are a better model for any young man. Mr. Knightley is too downright and decided, whereas Mr. Elton is so anxious to please that, as Emma's brother-in-law remarks, "every feature works." In her heart she knows that all this is great nonsense, and her first lesson in refinement is to exalt the second-rate and to say what she knows to be untrue.

She conscientiously throws Harriet at the parson's head, only to discover that the wretch does not know his place and has had the temerity to suppose that Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield has been throwing herself at his head. Indignant at his rebuff he takes himself off, marries elsewhere and brings to the Parsonage, not a grateful little protégée, but a pushing heiress who, without birth or breeding, challenges the right of Hartfield to lead Highbury society. Nor does Highbury seem to be aware of the enormity of such a claim. The jilted farmer, whom Emma has disparaged, shows "an interesting mixture of wounded affection and genuine delicacy." The disappointed parson, whom she has praised, displays the hairy heel in several exhibitions of petty spite. It seems as though Harriet's unaided instinct might have picked out the truer gentleman. Emma is shocked and bewildered and begins to wish that she had not undertaken Harriet, for whom a husband has still to be found.

In a generous mood she decides to hand over to her friend an amusing young stranger, Frank Churchill, who is visiting in the neighbourhood. She has been half-inclined to appropriate him for herself, but he is rather too much of a rattle really to please her though he is an agreeable escort, an ally against Mrs. Elton and very ready to join her in sneering at Jane Fairfax.

Harriet, however, has developed a swelled head. She has, this time, chosen her man without consulting Emma. With great complacency she confides her hope that Mr. Knightley himself is in love with her and gives Emma some ground for believing that it is not a vain hope. This is unspeakable disaster. Emma, while Harriet is talking, suddenly discovers the truth about her own heart.

Meanwhile the great news has burst upon Highbury. Frank Churchill has been secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax for a long time, has only come there in order to be near her, and has been courting Emma in order to throw dust in

the general eye. The jokes which he has shared with her about Jane are mild compared with the jokes which he can share with Jane about Emma. But out of this humiliation comes happiness. Mr. Knightley is so furious that Emma should have been thus callously exploited that he declares himself, and she has the felicity of learning that she is *his* Emma. Harriet marries her farmer and Hartfield marries Donwell.

The insolence to Miss Bates, the spinster aunt, is the great emotional turning-point of the book. Emma has many spells of depression over her other follies, but after this lapse she cries inconsolably and emerges from the experience a humbler and a wiser girl, for she has an excellent heart. On other occasions she has the humiliation of knowing that she has exposed herself. On this one she realises that she has given pain, and the disaster is, to her, incomparably greater.

Many readers cannot forgive her for it. Perhaps they are people who have never themselves, in youth, yielded to the temptation to show off. For that is how Emma comes to betray her own kind heart. She is uneasy at this picnic on Box Hill. Jane Fairfax is there, and she always has Jane on her conscience. Harriet and Mr. Elton are there; she cannot see them together without blushing. Mrs. Elton is there, off whom she wishes to score. Mr. Knightley is there, who is turning out to be right in all his warnings. So she tries to cover her uncomfortable feelings by asserting herself and flirting noisily with Frank Churchill, and is delivered into the power of that abominable ventriloquist's doll which speaks for people who show off. This creature betrays her, as it always betrays its victims, since it exists only to impress and does not care what it says, so long as it makes an effect. Sooner or later it will squeak out something so incredibly vulgar, stupid or cruel that the occasion can never afterwards be remembered without bitter humiliation. And the sharpest sting is this thought: *I could never have said such a thing! I am not like that! How could I have said it? Perhaps nobody noticed!*

For a very short time Emma manages to hope that nobody may have noticed. But Mr. Knightley puts a stop to this. He tells her exactly what he thinks of her and convinces her that the worst has happened: that Miss Bates has understood her malice.

Mr. Knightley was Miss Austen's other favourite. He is not a ladies' man. He is the busiest, most fully occupied hero whom we have yet encountered, though his time is chiefly spent in being a good landlord. He is as conscientious as Sir Thomas Bertram without any of the Mansfield self-importance. His tenants regard him as a personal friend and consult him on their private affairs. He has superlatively good manners, so simple, so

manly, so much part of himself that it does not occur to us that he has any until we observe the firm urbanity with which he treats impertinence. He is never more of a gentleman than when snubbing Mrs. Elton's attempt to give a strawberry party for him at his own house; few people could have resisted her juggernaut technique without awkwardness. His pleasant refusal gives her no grounds for offence and she is obliged to conclude that he is "a humourist, a thorough humourist."

He is the only person who can rally Miss Bates to her face. He knows that Emma and Frank Churchill can hear every word of his conversation with her when she leans out of the window of a room in which they are sitting, and accosts him as he rides past her house. Did he not admire the dancing of Miss Woodhouse and Mr. Churchill the night before? Yes, he did and "now, if your friends have any gratitude, they will say something pretty loud about you and me in return."

He has always loved Emma and has kept the list of books which she drew up at the age of fourteen, in an ambitious programme of self-improvement which she has never yet found the time to carry out. But, at seven and thirty, he thinks of himself as too old for her and in the beginning of the book will only admit to an anxiety about her, an interest in her fate. He thinks himself resigned to the idea that her happiness must depend upon some young whipper-snapper, but he begins to be jealous of Frank Churchill even before meeting him, and it is the fear that the young whipper-snapper has made her miserable that resolves him to speak out.

Frank is only just on the right side of the fence which divides Wickham, Willoughby and Crawford from Bingley and Tilney. He is very nearly a villain. He spends his time in the parlour with the ladies and leads a completely idle life, dancing attendance upon a rich aunt from whom he expects a fortune. He dare not confess his engagement to Jane Fairfax lest he should be disinherited and amuses himself in a great bustle of petty intrigue, pushing messages to Jane across the table under cover of the letter game, and disparaging her complexion to Emma. It is only by good luck that he does not do a great deal of harm. As it is, he ruins poor Jane's peace of mind and puts her in a very false position. But he is, as Emma says, a child of good fortune, and everybody forgives him.

Jane herself is never quite easy as a background figure. We know at once too much and too little of her, she catches our eye too often, and we are always expecting her to come forward and say something. She is neither a major nor a minor character. When we say good-bye to her we feel as Emma did: "We are to lose you—just as I begin to know you." And we are

hampered in our understanding of her by one very great difference between the point of view in Miss Austen's day and our own. A secret engagement was, in 1815, a very bad business. The consent of parents or guardians was still regarded as an essential thing. Jane was doing wrong in her own eyes and in the eyes of all her friends, and she had a sense of guilt which is not very comprehensible to-day.

It is the ambient air of Highbury which most charms us in this book. The little town and all its inhabitants are so real, so actual, that it is hard to believe we have never been there. The very cobbles, glistening after a sharp shower, are nearly solid enough to walk on. The sun burns our necks over Mr. Knightley's strawberry beds and the shade in Donwell lane is refreshing. It is as if that stretching of the imagination, which enabled Miss Austen to like Emma, gave her a firmer grasp upon everything within reach.

And Miss Bates is somehow a vehicle of this ambience. Some critics, including Austin Dobson, complain that her speeches are too long. In real life this would certainly have been so, for they would have told nothing. But she is frequently used by Miss Austen to convey the scene and to tell us what everybody is doing, so that her speeches are highly informative although a general impression of triviality and incoherence is preserved. One monologue from her saves pages of narrative. She makes, for instance, two long speeches during the ball at the Crown, in the course of which we learn: That it is raining. That the landlady of the Crown is standing in the passage to watch the guests come in. That Mrs. Weston is probably expecting a baby. That Miss Bates' mother is spending the evening with Emma's father. That it is in order to hold an umbrella over herself and Jane Fairfax that Frank Churchill has been hanging round in the passage all this time. That he has spent much of the day with them under the convenient and standing excuse of mending old Mrs. Bates' spectacles. We learn also the names of many of the guests and that Mr. Elton is not the only clergyman present, the names of Jane's partners for the first four dances and that none of them has been Frank Churchill because he means to secure her for supper and must not be dancing with her too often. That the long passage to the supper-room has been covered with matting and a draughty door nailed up. That Frank Churchill is so eager to put Jane's tippet on her shoulders and march her off to the corner he has selected in the supper-room that he nearly takes her out before anybody else. That Mrs. Elton will have none of this and firmly takes place of everybody. That Mrs. Elton is still wearing her bridal lace and consequently claims a bride's privileges. That Frank does manoeuvre Jane into his chosen corner at supper. That the Hartfield supper has consisted of tea, baked apples, biscuits, wine, and a fricassee of

sweetbreads with asparagus which poor Mrs. Bates has not been allowed to eat because Mr. Woodhouse thought it indigestible. That the two old people played backgammon. That Miss Bates herself, for all her chatter, has managed to slip out unobserved after the first four dances, has run through the rain in thick shoes to Hartfield, taken her old mother home, put her to bed, and returned without disturbing anybody.

If people had ever listened to Miss Bates they would have known a great deal more of what was happening in Highbury.

*Emma* is not a better book than *Mansfield Park*, but it is a worthy successor. It has a smaller canvas, a less ambitious theme, but it has this almost miraculous reality.

Miss Austen was now forty and she had written five novels about girls, of whom the oldest was one and twenty. In her sixth she broke new ground. Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion*, is an “elegant little woman of seven and twenty, with every beauty except bloom.” She is still single by her own choice. Eight years earlier she had broken off her engagement to Captain Wentworth, whom she deeply loved. It was done for his sake, not for her own; Lady Russell, her elderly counsellor, persuaded her that she might be a burden on him and hold him back in his career. But he did not think so and they parted in bitterness and estrangement.

At twenty-two she had refused a second suitor, Charles Musgrove, because she could not love him. He was a good match, an eldest son and the heir to the estate of Uppercross in Somerset. He could have given her a home, independence, children to love and an escape from the neglect of her family. But she would have none of him and he married her sister Mary.

For she still loves Wentworth. She will always love him, though hope is gone. She lives with her memories of that brief bliss in Kellynch, the home which she loves in spite of its loneliness. Her father and her elder sister, Elizabeth, care nothing for her. They leave her alone for long periods when they go to London to enjoy themselves in the fashionable world which is the breath of life to them.

At the opening of the story she is losing Kellynch too. The spendthrift Sir Walter has been obliged to let it and is removing with Elizabeth to Bath. They do not want Anne with them. She is despatched to her sister, Mary Musgrove, in the Little House at Uppercross, where, as a maiden aunt, she can make herself useful. Her life, henceforth, is to be a round of visits; never

again will she have anything or anybody quite of her own. Though she will be expected to listen and sympathise a good deal, her tastes will never be consulted and her opinion seldom asked. She will nurse sick children and play country dances for the Miss Musgroves, Mary's sisters-in-law, who live in the great house nearby. Everybody likes her, but nobody thinks of her.

Soon a new misery is added. Captain Wentworth reappears in the country. The affair is long over for him; she learns that, on meeting her again, he thought her so altered that he should not have known her. Some slight resentment remains, and that is all. She has to watch him courting Louisa Musgrove, a good-humoured chit, with whom he is not really in love. But he has made up his mind that he ought to get married and any pretty, sweet-tempered girl will do—any woman except Anne Elliot.

But "one's consequence, you know, varies so much at times without any particular reason." Jane Austen had discovered that seventeen years earlier. If women could ever penetrate the mystery of this variation, this inexplicable waxing and waning of their power, they would manage their lives much better than they do. For weeks, for months together, sometimes for years, a pretty girl may find herself in the doldrums, neglected, for no reason that she can discover. And then, quite suddenly, she is a success; looked at, surrounded. There seems to be no explanation, but a change of air and scene often has something to do with it.

Anne goes with all the younger Musgroves and Captain Wentworth for a few days to Lyme Regis. No sooner does she get there than the men begin to look at her. Perhaps the sea breezes, and her pleasure in the expedition, have restored a little of that lost bloom. On the very first night a Captain Benwick monopolises her. It is true that he is nursing a broken heart and wants to talk about it, but he is much struck with her and continues his attentions. It is plain that he is consolable and, if she had wished, she could certainly have "fixed" him. And then, on the following morning, while she is walking on the beach, a stranger gazes at her in earnest admiration. He turns out later to be her cousin, William Elliot, the heir of Kellynch. Captain Wentworth observes this tribute and looks at Anne himself, "a glance of brightness which seemed to say: That man is struck with you; and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again."

Shortly afterwards he has an opportunity of observing all her superiority when Louisa Musgrove falls off the Cobb. While everybody else faints, or has hysterics, Anne alone shows courage, resource and self-command. Wentworth has to rely on her entirely in meeting the crisis, and these virtues are fuel to a flame rekindled. But it is doubtful if they would have done

much for her if William Elliot had not first struck the match. A few more days of sea breezes and admiring strangers and she might have fainted comfortably on the Cobb with Mary, Louisa and Henrietta, without shaking his new-found conviction that she was still his Anne.

There is a little suspense. He, being the soul of honour, feels that his previous attentions to Louisa may have committed him to her. He does not think at first that he is free to renew his addresses to Anne. But when Louisa's "brain is set to rights," as his brother-in-law, Admiral Croft, puts it, she falls in love with the disconsolate Benwick. Wentworth hurries to Bath, whither Anne has gone to join her father and sister, finds William Elliot established there as his rival, grows jealous, explains himself, and all is well.

Knightley is more masculine than any of the earlier heroes. Wentworth is completely so in everything that he does and says. We are not told very much about him. He is the only hero with a profession which absorbs all his capacities, and in which he has risen entirely by his own exertions. His ship will always mean more to him than Anne does, warmly though he loves her. And, for that very reason, we are convinced of her happiness, because we feel that she has got a *man*.

Her feeling for him is not only conveyed by her thoughts; it is in her awareness of him, the change of temperature, as it were, which takes place the moment he enters a room where she is. Whatever she may be doing or saying, her sense of his presence sways her. There is a most skilful indication of this in that passage where she is discussing constancy with his friend, Captain Harville. Wentworth is sitting at some distance away, out of earshot as she thinks, writing a letter. The discussion is interrupted by a little clatter. Wentworth has dropped his pen. Anne and Harville continue. Harville says that all books tell of woman's inconstancy. Anne replies that most books have been written by men. "The pen has been in their hands," she says, so turning the phrase unconsciously because in her mind is the picture of the man sitting behind her with a pen in his hand.

*Persuasion* is a love story in a way that none of the other books are. Anne and Wentworth hold the scene so firmly that several points of interest in the background often go unremarked.

William Elliot, the cousin and heir to Kellynch, is a new sort of character. He is not an estimable man; he is hard-hearted, calculating and a little sly. His appreciation of Anne is sincere enough, but worldly ambition is his main object. Yet he is presented with a tolerance, almost with a sympathy, which Miss Austen does not usually accord to worldly people. He



is sensitive and cultivated, and in some things has very good judgement. He pays that sincere homage to idealism which is often to be heard from men on the make: since it does not embarrass them personally they can speak of it with the more eloquence. Anne complains to him of the stupidity of that Good Society which her father so anxiously courts. She outlines her idea of really superior people. He replies gently: "You are mistaken. That is not good company. That is the best." And he goes on to make out a pretty good case for the world's acceptance of lower standards.

In 1813, at Godmersham, Jane Austen met a certain Member of Parliament, a Mr. Lushington, who used to frank letters for her and of whom she wrote:

I like him very much. I am sure he is clever and a man of taste. He got a volume of Milton last night and spoke of it with warmth. He is quite an M.P., very smiling, with an exceeding good address and readiness of language. I am rather in love with him. I daresay he is ambitious and insincere.

He was. Lord Brabourne, in his editorial notes, describes the upward career of Mr. Lushington and tells a characteristic anecdote. In 1852 he was exceedingly indignant over some alleged bribery in the East Kent election, and warmly denounced electoral corruption. A little later, in the same conversation, he forgot all this, and began to talk of his experiences as Patronage Secretary of the Treasury before the Reform Bill in 1832. Recalling the owner of the Borough of New Romney, this champion of electoral purity broke into fresh indignation:

"A confounded old screw he was! I was always ready, on the part of the Government, to give him a thousand for the seats, but the old fellow always insisted upon *two thousand guineas*, and I had to give him his price."

This engaging careerist, who could combine a real appreciation of Milton with so palpable a lie in the soul, must have been a new type to Jane Austen. She knew very few men, hardly any outside her family. And those she knew were mostly squires, parsons or sailors. It was a pity. A woman can learn a great deal from a man, even upon a slight acquaintance, if she likes him. Sexual attraction, in small doses, serves as a tonic and stimulates the faculties. It was present here. That is what she means by being "rather in love with him." William Elliot is not of course a portrait of Mr. Lushington, but they have strong affinities.

Another interesting and new point is the use made, for the first time, of a town background. Anne Elliot's Bath is not Catherine Morland's Bath. In her visits to her poor sick friend, Mrs. Smith, she gets echoes of that great orchestra of tittle-tattle which is going on all the time among lackeys, chairmen, midwives, milliners and landladies, unheard by the visitors in the Assembly Rooms. All stories are known to this Bath, even much of Anne's own story. That important moment, when William Elliot looked at her on the beach of Lyme Regis, which she had thought no one could possibly remember except herself, turns up again in quite a new context, as part of another story of which she has suspected little. Mrs. Smith knows all about it:

“He had seen you indeed, before he came to Bath, and admired you, but without knowing it to be you. . . . Is this true? Did he see you last summer or autumn, somewhere down in the west?”

The purely comic characters in *Persuasion* are toned down considerably and Austin Dobson ascribes this to a scolding she got in the *Quarterly* for overdrawing Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse. But any very robust comedy would be out of key with the book. She was ill when she wrote it and her health, though it did not diminish her powers, coloured her spirits. Austen Leigh tells us that in the spring of 1816, before the novel was finished, she visited some old friends in Berkshire who noticed that “she went about her old haunts, and recalled old recollections connected with them in a particular manner, as if she did not expect ever to see them again.”

The book gets a large vote for the sake of its poignant emotional appeal. And it would be interesting to know how much of that vote is secured by one passage, the famous passage where Anne defends woman's constancy to Captain Harville. For, in the original draft of the novel, this passage did not exist. The book was completed on 18th July 1816 with a much tamer, more perfunctory, ending. But she was not satisfied. She felt that she had not “said everything.” Austen Leigh tells us that:

This weighed on her mind, the more so probably on account of the weak state of her health; so that one night she retired to rest in very low spirits. But such depression was in little accordance with her nature, and was soon shaken off. The next morning she awoke to more cheerful views and brighter inspirations: the sense of power revived; and imagination resumed its course. She cancelled the condemned chapter, and wrote two others, entirely different, in

its stead. . . . The tenth and eleventh chapters of *Persuasion* then, rather than the actual winding up of the story, contain the latest of her printed compositions, her last contribution to the entertainment of the public. Perhaps it may be thought that she has seldom written anything more brilliant.

One of the new chapters contained Anne's discussion with Captain Harville and her anguished protest on behalf of her own sex:

“We . . . do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other. . . . Your feelings may be the strongest but . . . ours are the most tender. Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer lived. . . . Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. . . . I believe you capable of everything great and good . . . so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.”

These sorrowful sentences are the swan song of a woman concerning whom we know very little, in spite of six novels and nearly a hundred letters. It is a short passage and it does not tell us much. But on this one occasion we know that she has dropped the mask, discarded the modulated accents, of Comedy. The very rhythm of her sentences has changed in this brief lament when:

She sang her first and last—  
And sang no more.

## CHAPTER VI

# SOME CRITICISMS

If this is heresy, I cannot help it.—Charlotte Brontë

**A**T her death Jane Austen held no place in English literature. She was rated lower than many contemporaries whose names, fifty years later, had been completely forgotten. To-day she is securely lodged among the classics, nor does it seem that her right to be there will soon be challenged. But her journey up the hill has been made very much in her own manner, it has been quiet, uneventful and a little mysterious. We know that she began at the bottom. We find her, now, very nearly at the top. But it is difficult to catch her at any point on the way up.

She had little to say which was likely to impress the generation immediately succeeding her. The Victorians asked for a great deal of action and incident in a novel. It was a great, expanding age and it needed elbow-room. It liked to laugh loudly and it enjoyed a good cry. It demanded that the domestic scene should be animated by stirring events, floods, fires, fevers, forged wills, murder trials, mad wives in attics and erring daughters turned out in the snow. Of comedy it asked a big canvas and a knowledge of the great world. Trollope, the quietest of its comedians, though he may write of events in a small parish is never parochial in his approach to it. Even in *The Warden*, the simplest of his stories, the small drama of a cathedral town, the private history of one old parson, is set against a great background of public opinion and leading articles in London newspapers.

Jane Austen described the life of women who must live at home, quiet and confined. The women of the nineteenth century were occupied in claiming the right to live elsewhere, if they liked, to be heard, to be free, to possess other privileges than that of hopeless love. They could have little patience with girls who were so well content to dance and wait for husbands. Even so late as 1915 the Principal of an Oxford women's college was heard to condemn Jane Austen "because all her women were so trivial." The women of our own time are, perhaps, more sympathetic. A home in which to live quietly is often, now, the object of their highest ambitions.

And after the Victorians came a generation which flinched from her matter-of-fact concern with the ratio between manners and money, a

generation which had new ideas about money and few about manners. Mr. H.G. Wells coupled the name of Jane Austen with “prunes and prisms.” Miss Katherine Mansfield, after reading that Edward and Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, were neither of them “quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life,” was moved to call upon her Maker.

But, in spite of all this, she was quietly making her way up the hill, not on the strength of public acclamation, but carried there by the insistence of certain individuals who went on declaring, for generation after generation, that she was great. These individuals were men of such weight and importance that the cumulative effect of their opinion came to be accepted. There was no ceremony of literary canonisation; there never is. But, one after another, some of the best minds in each decade spoke up for her, and the day arrived when the public found itself believing that she had always been at the top.

Archbishop Whately began the process in the *Quarterly* in 1821, when he mentioned Shakespeare. Macaulay allowed the same comparison. Coleridge, Whewell, Tennyson, Sydney Smith, Andrew Bradley—each of them did their share of the pushing.

Her best supporters have always been men. The leading women of the Victorian age, occupied in the struggle for the liberation of their sex, found less to appreciate in her. Even where they praised, they did so with a touch of patronage, a frequent suggestion that she was a little old-fashioned. She was “dear Jane Austen,” a favourite maiden aunt, a relic of yester year. “Her homely heroines charm,” said Miss Thackeray, while Mrs. Oliphant’s “model English girl, simple, saucy and fair,” so stuns the mind that it is difficult to assess the value of some other things which she had to say. And this notion of a lavender-scented, unsophisticated day-dreamer in a vicarage still persists, thanks to the motion pictures and the dramatic critics.

The strongest adverse criticism came from Charlotte Brontë, and it is only fair to remember that it was expressed in a private letter. Had she been writing for publication she would doubtless have measured her words a little more carefully.

Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as *outré* or extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of

the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood. Even to the feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition—too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet. What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores. She no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving bosom.

Which means that Miss Brontë would never have chosen to go fishing with Miss Austen.

George Moore once said that no artist can sincerely admire work which is the opposite of his own; and Miss Brontë's polemic is not so much an attack upon Jane Austen as a disparagement of the whole art of comedy. Charlotte Brontë did not understand comedy or appreciate its technique. Vehemence is out of place in the comic style, nor, incidentally, is it often to be observed in conjunction with profundity. The stormy sisterhood of the passions rule the domain of tragedy, where man discovers himself to be the sentient target of death. Or, to adopt a more homely metaphor, the passions often upset the human apple cart, and that is a tragic business. Comedy, which observes the lurching, lop-sided, ludicrous, valiant progress of the apple cart, when in motion, had best leave these accidents alone.

Few admirers of Jane Austen will claim that she studied the passions. But none can pass, without protest, the statement that she avoided frequent converse with the feelings. She is always engaged with them. Her principal characters all feel, and feel strongly: *want* of feeling is the most serious accusation she can bring against anybody. And it is very clear that she considered the passions as likely to cause it. To her, the feelings and the passions are antipathetic, since absorption in a single idea cancels that great variety of emotional response which keeps the apple cart going. She shows this very clearly in *Mansfield Park*, the only book where anybody comes to grief irrevocably. She uses the return of Sir Thomas from Antigua to point the contrast between Fanny's feelings and Maria's passion. Fanny is

conscious of many conflicting emotions: awe and dread of appearing before her uncle, surprise at his kind greeting, remorse for having loved him so little. She observes the change in him:

His voice was quick from the agitation of joy, and all that had been awful in his dignity seemed lost in tenderness . . . and when, on having courage to lift her eyes to his face, she saw that he was grown thinner and had the burnt, fagged, worn look of fatigue and a hot climate, every tender feeling was increased, and she was miserable in considering how much unsuspected vexation was probably ready to burst on him.

To Maria the return of a loving father was nothing. She still felt her hand pressed to Henry Crawford's heart and cared for little else.

Charlotte Brontë allowed that Jane Austen did her business curiously well. But she plainly does not think it much of a business, and seems to suggest that her predecessor should have studied other subjects and written about them with less smooth elegance. But she replies herself to this suggestion in another passage where she defends her own choice of subject and style:

When authors write best . . . an influence seems to waken in them which becomes their master—which will have its way—putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature, new moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones. Is it not so? And should we try to counteract this influence? Can we indeed counteract it?

She never spoke a truer word. But she had not even a bowing acquaintance with Jane Austen's master.

A more general criticism of Miss Austen is that her field was too narrow to be of great importance. Territorially she is confined to the rural districts of the southern counties of England. She knew nothing of the North. And her social range is tiny. We pay a one-page visit to a farmhouse parlour, in *Emma*, and are told, in the same book, of the misery of a cottage interior. Otherwise, the bottom of the scale is to be found among the Prices at Portsmouth, and the top, perhaps, among the Darcys at Pemberley. Of little

children running before dawn to the mills she knew nothing, though these were not only to be seen in the North. Robert Raikes started the first ragged school when she was five years old: it was set up in Gloucester, for children no older, who worked twelve hours a day in the factories. But the people of whom she wrote never thought about such things.

Of politics she knew nothing. They were discussed by the men when the women were not there. Members of Parliament could frank letters, and that was all her ladies knew about them. England was at war during most of her writing years. A titanic struggle was going on, in which this country was said to be saving herself by her exertions and Europe by her example. But we hear nothing of these exertions from Miss Austen. Her soldiers do not fight, and they never go farther away than Newcastle. Her sailors fight, it is true, but against whom? One reference in *Mansfield Park* drops us a hint: Sir Thomas, on his way back to England, experienced an alarm from a French privateer. One reference in *Persuasion* tells us that Waterloo has come and gone. "The peace has come too soon for that younker," says Admiral Croft of a colleague's grandson.

We are told that Jane Austen was very fond of history, but she never seems to have felt that she was living through it. The people with whom she mixed did not feel so; to them it was simply another war with the French, an accepted evil in the eighteenth century. It had very little effect upon the lives of most of the population; the casualties were tiny when compared to those of modern warfare. We observe the same complete indifference in the letters. Corunna is mentioned because the Austens knew connections of its hero. Nelson is mentioned because Southey's life of him might refer to her brother. But her general reaction to these things is the exclamation: "How horrible it is to have so many people killed! And what a blessing that one cares for none of them!" The candour of this may give us something of a shock, but it is, after all, the average human reaction to a remote disaster.

Of the ideas behind the French Revolution she had, of course, no inkling. Very few people had one, and she was never likely to have met any of those who had.

And of the country life which she knew so well she only gives us as much as concerned ladies in the parlour. We hear nothing of the men's pursuits, occupations, discussions and points of view. The seasons come and go; the great work of sowing, reaping and harvest goes on. We are only made aware of it when a farm cart cannot be spared to bring a harp from the neighbouring town.



Of purely feminine experience great territories are excluded. Marriage and the marriage relationship are rigidly left alone. We sit in the parlour with girls to whom one half of the human race are father, brothers, uncles, cousins and suitors, but never husbands. And, in a virgin's life, only those experiences are selected which furnish material for comedy. Religion is totally excluded, save for a few respectful references. Nobody dies. Very seldom does anybody threaten to die. There are no dire calamities.

All these limitations do not trouble those people who enjoy Miss Austen's books. But they must necessarily affect the number of her admirers. There must be many who would be quite capable of enjoying her artistry if they could find anything in the novels which was, to them, recognisable or even comprehensible. They feel as the schoolboy felt who wrote in a general knowledge paper: "Jane Austen was an authoress who was a very good authoress if you like girls."

And she had one limitation which even her warmest admirers must regret, which could not have been imposed by the rules of Comedy and which should not have arisen from any lack of experience. In spite of our enjoyment we stumble against it, every now and then, as against a barbed wire fence.

With one exception there is a complete gulf between the generations; there is no interplay of sympathy and understanding between the old and the young. The exception is in *Pride and Prejudice*; there is real friendship between Elizabeth and her father. But we never encounter such a relationship again. Catherine Morland's parents we scarcely meet. Mrs. Dashwood is a foolish woman, though agreeable, and Mr. Dashwood is dead. Both the Prices are deplorable. Mrs. Woodhouse is dead and Mr. Woodhouse a childish hypochondriac. Lady Elliot is dead and Sir Walter a monster. On mothers she is especially hard. There is a passage in *Persuasion* which brings us up with a round turn. It is the reference to the "large fat sighings" of poor old Mrs. Musgrove over the fate of a scapegrace son who had died some time before at sea. That Anne, gentle Anne, should find these demonstrations funny is a shock, but she did. She was relieved to be so placed that the "agitations of her slender form and pensive face" were effectively screened and she admired Captain Wentworth for not laughing too.

For, if Jane Austen gave scant recognition to all that a mother may be to a child, still less did she indicate anything of what a child can be to a mother, or how, to the old, the young can be a perpetual fountain of youth in the heart:

As sun and showers  
There had made a lasting Spring.

In these novels the young have little to give to the old save duty, and the old have nothing to offer the young save bad advice. An entire shade is missing from the spectrum of human experience.

She disliked old age. The letters are full of shrinking references to it. At its best she sees it as quiet, patient and grateful; old Mrs. Bates is the most she can do for it. We never, in her books, meet any of those wise and merry old people whose flippant attitude towards the solemnities of middle-age are often the delight and support of youth. Between those who are setting out on life's journey and those who are completing the last mile there is often great sympathy of outlook, an agreement as to the whole object of the expedition and the proper manner of conducting it, which allies them against those who are struggling in the central thickets. All this is prime material for comedy and frequently falls within the experience of the most secluded girl. But Miss Austen does not care to use it.

She loved her niece Fanny, but as a sister rather than as one of an older generation. Her letters about Fanny's love affairs are curious; they read as though written by an experienced contemporary. She seems to see everything from Fanny's end of the long road. Mr. A. and Mr. B. are, to her, as grown up and formed as they are to Fanny. She does not write of them as boys who will change and develop even as Fanny will, nor does she ever seem to feel that *two* young creatures are involved in these affairs. This gives a decisiveness to her opinions which have none of the hesitations which an elder feels when confronted with that alchemy of time which must be experienced and cannot be communicated. One feels that she never ceased to regret girlhood and never found much compensation in growing older.

But her courage was boundless. If she had lived longer she would not have rejected all that the years must teach. If she had reached old age, as Cassandra did, this one limitation might have disappeared and a lost hue would have been added to the rainbow.

## CHAPTER VII

# JANE AUSTEN'S PLACE IN LITERATURE

"There's Arcturus looking very bright."

"Yes, and the Bear. I wish I could see Cassiopeia."

"We must go out on the lawn for that. Should you be afraid?"

"Not in the least. It is a great while since we have had any star-gazing."—Edmund and Fanny in *Mansfield Park*.

**W**HY did Scott read and re-read these novels? Why did Macaulay and Whately mention Shakespeare? Why did a Master of Trinity fire up in defence of *Persuasion*? Why did Tennyson break a lance for Fanny Price? Why did the late Fr. Figgis, lecturing on Theology in Oxford in 1918, liken the style of Augustine of Hippo to the style of Miss Bates? And why did his scholarly audience break into instant applause?

Some courage is needed to suggest that high entertainment value may be one answer. These books are most amusing and very easy to read. But the public, especially the British public, is singularly ungrateful towards writers who can make it laugh. It cannot believe that great art can be attractive and it clings to the idea that a classic should make stiff reading. Art which is easily enjoyed must be superficial: that argument was employed against Mozart by the Wagnerian generation at the beginning of this century. And so it is not surprising that Miss Austen's strongest partisans have always been men of brilliant and powerful intellect, to whom stiff reading is all in the day's work.

But many books will give pleasure once and go to pieces on a second visit; many delightful tunes become insipid with repetition. It is only to the first-rate that we can return again and again, in many moods, for many reasons, and find that it has never failed us. Nobody who reads Miss Austen with pleasure once will ever find that he grows to like her less.

Her great virtue is the solid completeness of her imaginary world, tiny though it was. As Warre Cornish says: "Everything was actual to her." Everything is imagined with the same thoroughness, everything is of the same quality—the trees, the streets, the rain, the Mansfield billiard table, Captain Harville's fishing net and Lady Bertram's pug.

Every artist has this world of the imagination in which all work of any value must be done, and from which alone any contribution to truth must be wrested. He must earn every foot of ground in it for himself; everything must be new created, seen by the “inward eye” before it can exist there. For raw material he must depend upon the world of sense around him, upon what he sees with the outward eye. But he can do nothing with it until the *chose vue* has become the *chose imaginée*.

The solidity and coherence of this world must, of course, primarily depend upon his innate gifts: he cannot add one cubit to the imaginative stature with which he was born. But he can do a great deal for himself, for natural gifts will not take him far without integrity, a determination never to fake if he can avoid it, and intense concentration, since this business of seeing with the inward eye is a heavy labour.

To many writers this world is a shadowy, intermittent affair, where solid ground ends suddenly, where brilliant landscapes alternate with cloudy vacancy, and where a tree may never be more than a vague smudge because it has never been completely *seen*. Yet Arnold Bennett once said that all work of any real significance is done before the author actually begins to write, and while he is still wandering about in this world, making trial of its solidity.

When he comes to write he uses as much as he can of this imagined material and, where it fails him, he must fake. He fills up the gaps by reporting, as skilfully as he can, what he sees with the outward eye. Only writers know what shifts they are put to, to disguise these discrepancies, and facility in faking is a most dangerous gift. It can often deceive a discriminating public upon a first visit. It is when we return to a book that the fakes begin to declare themselves as stuffed properties brought in to give local colour, and painted cardboard landscapes set up to conceal gaps. There are very few novels, even among great ones, which do not reveal a few of these flaws. Indeed, it is in works of the first order that they are often most easily detected, since the discrepancy in value is more marked and many great writers have had but a poor facility in faking. Few admirers of Hardy have ever had a word to say for Alec D’Urberville, and no admirer of Charlotte Brontë has ever been able to swallow Blanche Ingram. They are imported because they are necessary to the plot, and if their authors had possessed less integrity they would have been better disguised. But Hardy, when at a loss, made use of cuttings out of the newspaper, and Charlotte Brontë decorated a feather bolster with black ringlets and “a fashionable drawl” and hoped it would do for a proud beauty.

In the work of Jane Austen we never trip over a fake, and this gives us a rare sense of serenity and assurance. We can stray at will in this small garden of hers, secure that we shall not discover anything to be painted cardboard. She was born with great gifts, she had complete integrity, and a power of concentrated labour which few novelists have ever possessed. So that her little world is whole and solid to an astonishing degree. As she grew and expanded in her art, so does our sense of its reality increase. This is especially apparent in her dialogue. With each book the separate, individual voices of her characters grow clearer. In the earlier books only the principal characters seem to speak their own lines, and much of the dialogue we hear in the voice of the narrator. But in the later group everybody has a voice of his own. We cannot think of the lines apart from the character of the speaker; we cannot think of Mrs. Norris without a sense of grating irritation at her noise, or of Mrs. Elton without knowing that she had very little vocal range. And the voices vary with the scene. They rise in excitement, they sink to a murmur. Against the pensive tones of Fanny and Edmund, as they stand by the window looking out upon the starry night, we hear all the social chatter going on in the drawing-room behind them.

Very few writers have been able to do this, and that is why Macaulay allowed a comparison with Shakespeare, whose imaginary world was so varied, vast and noble, but not more *actual* than hers. He gave us fresh continents in which to roam, she but a few miles of pleasant country-side. But upon any artist who can bequeath to us this extension of experience, this extra world of his mind, however narrow, however limited, time will surely and ultimately bestow a place among the Great.

## BIOGRAPHICAL DATES

December 16, 1775. Born at Steventon, Hampshire.

1797. *First Impressions* (later *Pride and Prejudice*) offered to publisher.

1797. *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* begun.

1800. Moved to Bath.

1803. *Northanger Abbey* sold but not published.

1804. *The Watsons* (fragment) begun.

1805. Moved to Southampton.

1809. Moved to Chawton.

1811. *Sense and Sensibility* published.

1811. *Mansfield Park* begun.

1813. *Pride and Prejudice* published.

1814. *Mansfield Park* published.

1814. *Emma* begun.

1815. *Persuasion* begun.

1816. *Emma* published.

1816. *Sanditon* begun.

May 1817. Moved to Winchester because of failing health.

July 18, 1817. Death, and burial in Winchester Cathedral.

1818. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* published.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Jane Austen* by Margaret Kennedy]