

Jane Austen

Robert P. Irvine

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Jane Austen

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Abbreviations and referencing

Page references in this text take three forms, depending on the type of text being referred to. A page number in square brackets in bold thus: **[see p. 12]** refers you to another part of this volume; plain numerals in round brackets thus: (Johnson 1988: 12) or, in later references, just (12) refer you to a secondary work, listed alphabetically in one of the bibliographies at the end of the volume; while upper- and lower-case roman and arabic numerals thus: (I.ii.34) refer you to volume, chapter and page numbers in the most recent Penguin Classics editions of Austen's novels (2003: also in the bibliography). These volume numbers, and the accompanying non-continuous chapter numbers, are those of the original editions of the novels, which appeared in two or three separate volumes. As well as Penguin, World's Classics and Broadview editions use these original divisions to mark the text.

Introduction

Jane Austen is one of very few writers to be well known to thousands of people who have never read any of her books. She is one of a few writers to have been taken, like Shakespeare, to represent something enduring about her nation. As such, she can be invoked in public debate in Britain in ways that have little to do with what she actually wrote or the context in which she wrote it. She is therefore one of the few writers from the past of whom an understanding is necessary to allow the modern reader to make a more informed contribution to contemporary discussions of class, gender and nationality.

Part 1 of this book attempts to summarise both the political and the social context in which Austen wrote, and the particular literary resources that were available to her as a woman novelist at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Part 2 then explores the six novels that she published, or prepared for publication, in her lifetime. Part 3 then discusses the various ways in which those novels have been discussed by academic literary critics in the past sixty years or so. Finally, Part 4 introduces the reader to the ongoing critical discussion of film and television adaptations of Austen's work.

The aim of this book is to give readers a map with which they can navigate through Austen's works, their historical, social and literary context and the critical discussion that they and their film versions have generated. Or rather, it offers four maps, each cross-referenced to the others. Newcomers to Austen might most usefully begin with the section of Part 2 on the novel that they are currently reading. That section will direct them to Part 1, where the social or political issues raised are discussed at greater length; or they could use the references at the end of that section to guide them to criticism outlined in Parts 3 and 4 on particular aspects of that novel that have caught their attention. Those readers already familiar with some of Austen's novels might find it more useful to turn directly to Parts 1, 3 or 4, to fill in any gaps in their understanding of Austen's historical period, or to discover the problems currently being debated in academic criticism of her novels and their screen adaptations.



Life and contexts

Introduction

Part 1 puts Jane Austen's career as a novelist in the context of the historical development of English society, of the novel and of the place of women in relation to both, in the century or so until her death. It appears to spend comparatively little time on the details of her life, for which you should turn to any of the cited biographies. But it assumes that her life and career as a novelist as summarised here are interesting precisely because they were shaped by and reflect the particular forces and assumptions that characterised her age, her class and her nation. These are the forces and assumptions that we will see being acted out and questioned in her novels in Part 2. After outlining Austen's biography Part 1 will accordingly move from the general to the particular: from English society in general to the place of women in that society, to the place of women writers, and finally women novelists in particular; and from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in general to the decades after 1770, and then specifically the aftermath of the French Revolution and of the wars with France, in which Austen actually wrote her fiction.

For a clear outline of how the events of Austen's life correspond to those of political and literary history, please consult the Chronology at the end of this book [see pp. 161–5].

Austen's life

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at Steventon in Hampshire, in the south-east of England. Her father, the Reverend George Austen, was Rector of Steventon church. Both his family background and that of his wife Cassandra (*née* Leigh) were in the rural landowning classes, but his father was a mere surgeon (a much cruder and less prestigious profession than it would later become), while Cassandra's lineage ranged much higher. Paying posts in the Church of England, known as church 'livings', were at this time in the gift of the landowners on whose estates the parishes lay. The Steventon estate was owned by George Austen's wealthy second cousin, Thomas Knight, who two years before Austen's birth had also granted George the living of nearby Deane.

But the income from these two positions only came to about £200 a year. To put this in perspective, a skilled worker such as a carpenter or blacksmith could earn around £100 a year at this time, and the 'gentry', smaller landowners such as Knight, could collect between £1,000 and £5,000 annually in rents and other income from their estates (Spring 1983: 58). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars' living of £200 a year is regarded as too little to support a wife (III.iv.270; cited in Spring 1983: 62). Yet Jane was George Austen's seventh child, and another arrived three years later. He supported this large family with additional income from one of the farms on Knight's estate, and by boarding and tutoring local boys. Revd Austen also tutored his own sons, but Jane and her sister Cassandra, three years her senior, were educated at first by their mother, in reading, writing and religion at the very least. The girls continued their education for two years at boarding schools, first at Oxford and Southampton in 1783, and then from 1785 to 1786 in Reading. At such establishments they studied needlework, English, French and Italian, and possibly music and drawing. These were the conventional 'accomplishments' expected of young ladies of their rank, although they also seem to have covered some history (Fergus 1991: 34–7; Honan 1997: 31–4, 37) [see pp. 24–5]. Their brothers' education, on the other hand, would have centred on the Latin language and its literature. Acquiring a knowledge of these subjects was something of a rite of passage into the masculine ruling class and a requirement for entry to Oxford or Cambridge universities and thus to the church. This was the path taken by James, the eldest, and Henry, the fourth son, who were supported financially at St John's College, Oxford, by their father, but also subsidised by the college as descendants of its founders through their mother's higher-ranking side of the family. In contrast, the two youngest boys, Frank and Charles, were packed off to the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth at around twelve years of age to begin careers as midshipmen.

We know that Jane Austen began writing at an early age as three volumes of stories and verses survive that were composed in her teens. This material was written between 1787 or 1788 and 1792 for the entertainment of family and friends and with the family's full encouragement. The second volume includes an impressive short fiction in letters called 'Love and Friendship', and the third culminates in the already sophisticated short novel, 'Catherine, or the Bower'. In 1794 Austen wrote another that survives in a later copy as 'Lady Susan'. And in 1795 and 1796 she wrote 'Elinor and Marianne' and 'First Impressions', the novels that, much later and after some revision, appeared at the start of her career as a published author as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) respectively. The reason for the long gap between the writing and publication of these novels we shall discuss below. In 1797 George Austen submitted the manuscript of 'First Impressions' to London publishers Cadell & Davies who rejected it without even looking it over, but this disappointment did not stop his daughter immediately beginning the revision of 'Elinor and Marianne' that would turn it into *Sense and Sensibility*. By 1799 she had completed another novel, 'Susan', which would be published after her death as *Northanger Abbey* (1817).

In 1801 Austen's father retired, and his son James, who was already looking after Deane as its curate, took over the duties of Steventon as well. The income

from the parish remained George's for his lifetime, and he took his wife and daughters with him to Bath, then a fashionable resort to which many professionals chose to retire at the end of their careers, quite independently of their hope of any good effects from the supposedly healing waters of the spa. The Austens had several practical reasons for the move, but biographers often speculate that they may also have wanted to increase Jane and Cassandra's chances of meeting potential husbands (Halperin 1984: 124; Tomalin 2000: 174; Spence 2003: 132). In 1795–6 Jane had slipped into a serious relationship with Tom Lefroy, another family friend, but his relatives made sure this did not get as far as a proposal of marriage from a very young and penniless man. It was not at Bath, however, but on a visit to James at Steventon in 1802 that the eldest son of a wealthy local landowning family called Bigg-Wither, old friends and neighbours of the Austens, proposed to Jane and was accepted. The following morning she withdrew her acceptance. This vacillation is usually read as being between the substantial financial comfort that marriage to Bigg-Wither offered Jane, and her realisation that she could never love him, between material self-interest and romantic principle, although Bigg-Wither seems to have been a man very hard to like, let alone love (Halperin 1984: 134–5; Honan 1997: 193–7; Nokes 1997: 251–3).

It was also while living at Bath that Jane first succeeded in selling a novel, 'Susan', receiving £10 for the manuscript from the publishing firm Crosby & Co. This was not a great sum even then, but probably a typical payment for a two-volume novel from an unknown writer: Frances Burney (1752–1840), the most financially successful female novelist of the period and much better connected than Austen in London publishing circles, received only £20 for the manuscript of her first, three-volume, novel, *Evelina* (1778) (Turner 1992: 114). But although advertised, 'Susan' was not published, and having sold the manuscript outright Austen could do nothing about this. Austen's publishing options will be discussed later [see pp. 13–16]. George Austen died quite suddenly in Bath in 1805, and with him went the £600 a year that was his income from various sources at this time. Mrs Austen, Jane and Cassandra hung on in Bath for another year or so, living now on Mrs Austen's private income of £210 a year, supplemented with remittances from the more prosperous of her sons. In 1806, the Austen women moved in with sailor Frank, his wife Mary and their little daughter, in Southampton. In 1809 Mrs Austen's second son Edward, who had been adopted as heir by Thomas Knight (the son of George Austen's cousin and patron of the same name), invited them to settle at Chawton Cottage, back on the Hampshire estate on which the two girls had grown up. They jumped at the chance (Honan 1997: 250). Jane was to live at Chawton for the rest of her life, and it was here that she not only revised *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and (eventually) *Northanger Abbey* for publication, but also wrote three new novels, *Mansfield Park* (in 1811–13, published 1814), *Emma* (in 1814–15, published in 1815) and *Persuasion* (in 1815–16, published posthumously in 1817); and began a fourth, 'Sanditon', in 1817. In May 1817 she took lodgings in Winchester to be near the physician who was treating her for an illness, probably a glandular disorder called Addison's disease, which had been progressively weakening her for a year; but the treatment was to no avail and she died there on 18 July 1817. She was forty-one years old.

It is striking, in this brief sketch of Austen's career, that the steady development of her output as a novelist seems to have been suspended when she left Hampshire in 1801, only to be energetically resumed on her return there in 1809. An aborted novel, 'The Watsons', seems to be the only prose fiction that she began between those dates. Biographers often suggest that Austen's creativity depended on the rural surroundings, both natural and social, in which she had grown up, and that her unhappiness in town prevented her from writing (Lascelles 1995: 29; Tomalin 2000: 169; Shields 2001: 73). It is, however, at least possible that the public entertainments available in Bath and Southampton not only allowed little time for writing but removed the necessity for story-telling initially conceived as family entertainment, without Austen being particularly unhappy about this (Nokes 1997: 342, 350–1). In addition, Austen spent a large proportion of this period staying with friends all over the south of England as well as moving house several times, and the very unsettled nature of this existence militates against a project demanding as much time as writing a long novel (Fergus 1991: 104–6). It is certainly possible to see Austen's time in Bath and Southampton as valuable to her writing in the new experiences that it offered her (Honan 1997: 228–30; Shields 2001: 108). Her brother Henry, in the 'Biographical Notice of the Author' which he attached to the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, claims that 'some' of her novels were 'the gradual performance of her previous life' and were withheld from publication 'till time and many perusals had satisfied her' of their real worth (Austen 1998: 270–1). Henry presumably refers not just to *Northanger Abbey* but to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* as well. His portrayal of an author suffering 'an invincible distrust of her own judgement' (270) in this way may be designed to fit in with the feminine modesty and self-effacement demanded of female writers [see pp. 8, 12–13]. But his comment also suggests that Austen continued to revise her work even when not composing new material. The immediate aftermath of her father's death, when she abandoned 'The Watsons', may be the only real interruption in this ongoing creative activity (Honan 1997: 215).

Yet the timing of Austen's second, and more determined, effort to get her work published remains odd. The wives and daughters of poorly paid clergymen were always in a financially insecure position, dependent on an income that, unlike an income from an estate or from capital investments, abruptly ceased on his death, and they were unlikely to be able to save enough in his lifetime to live off the interest afterwards. In this event, many turned to the only other 'investment' they could fall back on, namely their education, often unusually good for women, by becoming professional writers (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 125; Lovell 1987: 42; Turner 1992: 63). Of the three Austen women in Bath, Jane was the only one with absolutely no private resources to contribute to their household, Cassandra having a small private income of her own (Halperin 1984: 145–6). Yet her first visible move towards resuming her career as a published novelist, an angry letter to the publisher Crosby demanding that he either publish or return 'Susan', is not made until April 1809, *after* the move to Chawton had been decided on and thus a return to more comfortable circumstances already assured (Le Faye 1995: 174–5).

Austen's England: hierarchy, modernity and gender

The England in which Jane Austen lived and worked was, on the one hand, structured by a long-established political and social order and, on the other, undergoing rapid and accelerating social and economic change. The political and social institutions of the nation were still those of the period historians sometimes, for convenience, refer to as 'the long eighteenth century'. This is the period beginning with the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688, when a group of English lords forced the Catholic King James II into exile and replaced him with his Protestant sister Mary and her Dutch husband William, Prince of Orange. The revolution established a constitution which, by the Bill of Rights of 1689, abolished the arbitrary exercise of power by the monarch and gave real legislative and executive power to the Houses of Parliament: the hereditary House of Lords and, primarily, the elected House of Commons. The revolution brought to a close the political and religious wars of the seventeenth century in England and is called 'Glorious' because it was, in England, peaceful, although it was not so in Ireland and Scotland. The 'long eighteenth century' can most usefully be taken to end in 1832, when the first of the nineteenth century's Reform Bills was finally, after a long struggle, passed by parliament. This slightly extended and greatly rationalised the qualifications for voting in elections for the Commons. For example, wealthy property owners in the expanding industrial towns were allowed to vote for the first time after 1832.

For the political settlement of 1688–9 was not a democratic one. The aristocracy, the titled nobility, the great landowning families of 'quality' or 'rank', simply inherited political power, with their most senior males sitting in the House of Lords. But the right to vote for members of the House of Commons was also very restricted, mostly to the (male) gentry, those who held property in the form of country estates. There were only a few hundred aristocratic families in England in this period, but over 10,000 gentry families (Vickery 1998: 14), out of a total population that by 1801 was over nine million (Plumb 1950: 144). English society in the long eighteenth century can thus be divided politically into three groups: aristocracy, gentry and everyone else. This last group included the vast majority of the population with no property who did manual work for a living: tenant farmers and rural labourers, and the increasing numbers of factory workers and miners, who had no vote in anything. But among those with no vote was also a very varied section of society often referred to at the time as the 'middling sort' (Hunt 1996: 15). In the towns and cities this included an expanding urban middle class whose property took the form of stakes in manufacturing companies or trading concerns, and who were actively engaged in commerce. In both town and country, it included those living off interest paid on capital investments, often those who had retired from their own enterprises; and lawyers, churchmen and officers in the armed services.

Jane Austen's immediate family belonged to the rural version of this professional group, earning its living mainly in the church and the military. But it retained close ties to the gentry. Mobility between gentry and the rural professional classes was normal, as only the eldest son of a landowning family

inherited the estate (by a law known as 'primogeniture'), and the army and the church were common destinations for younger sons. An understanding of precisely where one stood in the social hierarchy was important to anyone in England in this period: the Austens stood below gentry families like the Knights or the Bigg-Withers but, because George was university-educated, above any kind of merchant. Yet social identity remained defined more by one's local or family connections with those above or below one in this hierarchy, from whom one could ask favours or to whom one could grant them, rather than by one's solidarity with others on the same social level as oneself. How far a man might get in the army, or in government, was determined by the extent to which these 'connections' with the power to do so pushed positions his way. This is called 'patronage'. So, for example, George Austen, the orphaned son of a country surgeon, is taken up by an uncle who paves his way towards a scholarship to Oxford. He is then given his two church livings by a second cousin, Thomas Knight (Spring 1983: 62–3; Honan 1997: 14–15). We will discuss patronage in Austen's fiction in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* [see pp. 58, 63–4]. It is because people tended to identify themselves within these local networks that using the term 'class' to describe the 'middling sort' is a bit anachronistic in Austen's period (Martin 1998; though see also McMaster 1997). 'Class' identities, later in the nineteenth century, group people by the source of their income (labour, capital or land). As such, class is something shared by people in the same economic situation all across the nation, and indeed the world. But class was beginning to emerge as a type of social organisation in Austen's lifetime: 'At some point between the French Revolution and the Great Reform Act [of 1832], the vertical antagonisms and horizontal solidarities of class emerged on a national scale and overlay the vertical bonds and horizontal rivalries of connection and interest' (Perkin 1969: 177). Accordingly, many discussions of Austen's novels centre on her treatment of class [see pp. 114–15, 121–4].

Indeed England in the long eighteenth century, while it remained a quite rigidly hierarchical society, also saw the emergence of a range of characteristically modern institutions, of which class can be seen as one. A limited monarchy with a sovereign parliament allowed the emergence of a recognisably modern state system. The state was centred no longer on the person of a king or queen commanding the loyalty of aristocrats, but rather on a bureaucracy mostly concerned with the raising and distribution of revenue, especially to the increasingly important and professional armed forces. Trade with Britain's colonies in North America, the Caribbean and India, including the Atlantic trade in African slaves [see pp. 134–8] made Britain rich. This trade made possible, and was in turn financed by, a new system of stake-holding capitalism, with trading companies owned by groups of investors. Investors soon included many landowners as well as members of the urban commercial and professional classes. The eighteenth century is Britain's first great capitalist age, and expanded and raised to new prominence a class of people whose wealth consisted in company stocks or government bonds, that is in (recently acquired) money (they are often referred to as the 'moneyed' classes), as opposed to those whose property consisted mainly of (inherited) land (the 'landed' gentry and aristocracy).

Capital, generated and invested more or less independently of government control, in turn made possible and necessary the emergence of another modern

institution. This is a public culture of information exchange, often referred to as the 'public sphere' after its discussion under this name in the 1960s by Jürgen Habermas (1989). The emergence of this public sphere was perhaps driven at first by the need of investors to know what was going on in the business world, but it also provided a space outside parliament in which government policy, social practice and contemporary ideas and issues generally could be freely debated. This space was constituted on the one hand by the coffee-houses and salons (semi-public meeting spaces in the town houses of wealthy families) of London and a few other cities, but also by the rapidly expanding world of print and its regular daily, weekly or monthly journals. Such spaces and such publications made possible a rational criticism of society that is part of what we call the 'Enlightenment' of this period. Existing social practices and institutions, rather than being taken as authoritative merely because they were inherited from the past, were to be examined and explained in order that they might be improved, on the basis of whatever consensus could be reached in the public sphere.

Jane Austen, then, was writing within a society that was both hierarchical and modernising. But her relation to both social hierarchy and social change was shaped by the fact of her gender. There are, broadly speaking, two types of story that social and cultural historians tell about the changing place of women in English society in the long eighteenth century. One of these describes an increasing separation between the types of activity open to men and those open to women. As agriculture became more and more a capitalist industry, and as trade and manufacture expanded, these activities no longer took place, at least partly, in the homes of the farmers and tradespeople. The wives and daughters of prosperous farmers, merchants and artisans became 'physically isolated' from the world of public business (Hill 1989: 51) and thus lost the prestige and authority that came from contributing to family finances and the local economy. At the same time, the very prosperity of the family enterprises removed the need for them to work in the first place. A division opened up among the 'middling sort' between a public world of work, now exclusively male, and a private world of the home and of leisure to which the women were confined. And through this domesticity of their women, the middling sort could claim a share in the culture of their social superiors in the gentry, whose women of course had never worked. This share in gentry culture is referred to as 'gentility' (Davidoff 1995: 181), making the menfolk of the middling sort 'gentlemen' (Barrell 1983: 31–40) and thus distancing them from their poorer parents or grandparents. 'For a middle-class woman of the early nineteenth century, gentility was coming to be defined by a special form of femininity which ran directly counter to acting as a visibly independent economic agent' (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 315). It is argued that capitalism thus narrowed the sphere in which women could enjoy authority and responsibility to the world of the home, and principally to domestic economy and childcare. The wealthier such women were, the more they could delegate such tasks to servants, and the more they were left in lives of pointless leisure (Stone and Stone 1977: 396).

This 'domestic thesis' (Klein 1995: 97) or theory of emerging 'separate spheres' for men and women (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 33) can, however, be challenged on several grounds. For one thing it tends to identify publicly performed economic activity with the 'public sphere' as such. Women of the 'middling sort' may not

have worked as much as their mothers or grandmothers, but that does not mean they were excluded from all forms of public life. Other forms of public activity may have remained, or become, open to them: institutionalised charitable work or the organisation of local assemblies and other social events (Vickery 1998: 10, 240–1). The home itself was not necessarily entirely ‘private’, remaining an important site of business negotiation where hospitality performed a crucial role in cementing economic relationships (Vickery 1998: 9, 195–6). Further, much of the evidence for the ‘domestic thesis’ is drawn from ‘advice’ or ‘conduct’ literature, which counselled young women of the propertied classes on the behaviour required of them as daughters and in courtship: how to behave in public, what to look for in a potential husband, how to respond to his advances and so on. Famous examples include James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1766: the book from which Mr Collins tries to read in chapter xiv of *Pride and Prejudice*); John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774); and Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1798). In particular, these books emphasise the necessity for young women always to appear subordinate to the needs of men, and not to express their own needs or desires; a feminine self-effacement often referred to as ‘modesty’ [p. 126]. However, such literature by its very nature describes not how young women of the middle ranks behaved, but how somebody thought they ought to behave (Vickery 1998: 5–7). The private writing of propertied women themselves in this period does not always suggest a perception or resentment of an increasing exclusion from the public world. Women in the long eighteenth century remained economically and legally subordinate to men, but this was hardly a recent development, and may not have been made noticeably worse by the expansion of capitalism in the organisation of the economy.

The second story that social and cultural historians tell about the changing status of English women in the long eighteenth century starts from rather different premises. The ‘domestic thesis’ often involves the assumption that a culture of feminine domesticity was a ‘middle-class’ invention, and indeed a way in which the new moneyed classes, excluded from political power by not possessing land, could assert their moral and cultural superiority over the landed classes who monopolised state politics (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 30). For the ‘privacy’ of the middle-class woman made her different not just from the working woman of the labouring classes but also from the aristocratic woman who showed off her beauty and, through her clothes and jewels, her husband’s wealth and power in the public assemblies, theatres and pleasure gardens of London. It can, however, be argued that what is striking about property-owning English society in the long eighteenth century was precisely the absence of any major class divide along the boundary between moneyed and landed groups. Instead, one can trace the emergence of a new set of social rules and values that are shared by the moneyed and the landed. This happened partly by the middling sort imitating the gentry, an imitation referred to as ‘gentility’ above. But the gentry too gave up some of its distinctive ways in favour of a middle-class way of life.

These new rules and values are usually referred to as ‘polite’ and were formulated and propagated above all through the rapidly expanding public culture of print. The most influential publications were the daily papers written almost entirely by two Oxford-educated occasional poets, playwrights and MPs, Joseph