MASTERS OF WORLD LITERATURE
Edited by Louis Kronenberger

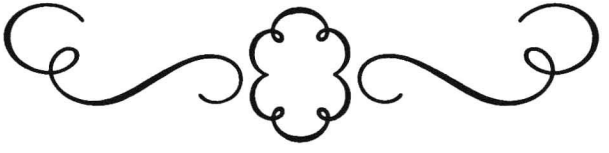
JANE AUSTEN

DOUGLAS BUSH

MASTERS OF WORLD LITERATURE SERIES

LOUIS KRONENBERGER, GENERAL EDITOR

Jane Austen



by Douglas Bush

First published in the U.S.A. 1975
First published in the United Kingdom 1975
Reprinted (with alterations) 1978

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi Dublin Hong Kong
Johannesburg Lagos Melbourne New York Singapore Tokyo

ISBN 0 333 14207 1 (hardcover)
ISBN 0 333 24765 5 (paperback)

Printed in Hong Kong by
China Translation & Printing Services Ltd.

To Hazel, once more

Preface

FOUR OF JANE AUSTEN'S novels were published anonymously during 1811–15, the other two together at the end of 1817, after her death. The reception of the first four, in the few years before she died, was highly encouraging (though sales were nowhere near those of Scott, Maria Edgeworth, or Hannah More); but she might have been astonished if she could have known that the years 1923–73 (to take an arbitrary round number) would yield some sixty-seven books about her and her work, some thirty-one of them in the last decade—not to mention editions, parts of critical books, and hundreds of essays and articles. Jane Austen has benefited from the general advance of modern criticism from loose impressionism to precise analysis, and many modern studies have promoted knowledge and greatly sharpened and sensitized understanding, at least among specialists, of the literary and ideological background of her fiction, the growing subtlety of her ironic art, and the larger and deeper significance of her supposedly small themes. But her ever-widening popularity, from her own time to ours, has been due less to interest in her finely unobtrusive craftsmanship or her view of society than to her humorous and serious insight into the character and the personal relations, the happy and unhappy experience, of ordinary people

of the upper middle class. Intimate association with such people, whose feelings and thoughts, problems and actions, are set forth by a sane imagination at once realistic and detached, moral and comic, satirical and sympathetic—this is what the multitude of readers, from cosy "Janeites" to austere highbrows, have in their various ways enjoyed. And such enjoyment does not appear to have been made pallid by the strong spices required in most recent fiction.

To speak of the number of modern books about Jane Austen is to suggest that there is no urgent reason for another one, since neither lifelong devotion nor her bicentenary is enough. A better reason is that many recent critics have addressed experts in her work or in the history or technique of fiction and that this book, as the first two chapters imply, is only a general account, a sort of "companion" to Jane Austen, on a modest scale, addressed to general readers. Hence, while it has profited from the mass of books and essays (scores of which could not be cited), both the author's aim and his limitations forbid elaborate, ultra-sophisticated analysis of either technique or ideas. But something can be shown of Jane Austen's increasing mastery of dramatic situation, dialogue, characterization, and atmosphere, of form and theme, of her active awareness of a principle enunciated by Henry James: that "the art of the novel," "only to a less extent" than that of the drama, "is above all the art of preparations."[1] It is assumed here that the best way to appreciate Jane Austen's mastery of form and other virtues is the simplest way: to follow her development of a story, with varying degrees of brevity, as a basis for comment. It may be hoped that enough evidence is given to illustrate the long-accepted fact that the retiring spinster, while no Dickens, and rarely a "poet," is one of the finest of English novelists and that in both her art and her moral and social outlook she is the only, or the supreme, "classical" writer in that rich domain.

There are other reasons for adding one's small testimony to the long shelf. At times in modern criticism what one may think philosophical over-reading translates Jane Austen's instinctive

[1] Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (New York Edition), 7, xii; *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner, 1950), 86.

concreteness into large abstractions or social parables which she would hardly have recognized: we hear, for instance, of her epistemology and ontology and, more commonly, of that master-key to all social phenomena of the past twenty-five centuries, the rise of the middle class. She does of course use, with precise awareness of their established meaning, the abstract terms of the moral vocabulary, but that is another matter. Then some emancipated critics have been moved to denounce Jane Austen's moral principles and attitudes, especially as embodied in *Mansfield Park*. Although such libertarians have been so severe, even violent, it may be remembered that their and our age of undisciplined sensibility and defective ethical reason had already been judged by her. Further, some more or less sympathetic critics have assumed or argued that Jane Austen's view of life was thoroughly secular and that early tributes to her religious seriousness only came from perfunctory familial piety. Without subscribing to the legend of "gentle Jane," one may have a different opinion on these important points.

Several kinds of "sources" have been used, acutely or erratically, by some modern critics to illustrate Jane Austen's materials and methods, but these are in general slighted here. One kind of speculation began in her own lifetime, the "recognition" of originals of characters among her connections or even among strangers. This was an indirect testimony to her power of lifelike character-drawing, but her relations themselves did not discern such resemblances (apart from a few minute items), and we may stand on the author's firm principle that she wished "to create not to reproduce": "I am much too proud of my own gentlemen ever to admit that they are only Mr. A. or Major C."[2]

Two more fruitful areas of exploration have been Jane Austen's own early writings (made fully available only in 1922 f.) and the relation of all her work to the novels of her predecessors,

[2] The witness quoted—who will be quoted again on occasion—was a Mrs. Barrett, who had been a friend and correspondent of Jane Austen and who died in 1865. Her recollections were recorded in a letter of 1869 from a clergyman friend which R. W. Chapman printed in part in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 4 (1949–50), 171–74. This text was presumably more accurate than that given in the *Memoir* (1870 f.; ed. R. W. Chapman, 1926, p. 157) and quoted therefrom in Chapman's *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1950), 126.

Richardson, Fanny Burney, and many minor writers, and to eighteenth-century literature in general. It seems clear—and it was altogether natural—that she took up and developed, satirically or seriously, some themes, incidents, and types of character already treated or touched by her youthful self and by other novelists. In both cases what is significant is not mere "borrowing" but the manner of re-creation. Fanny Burney, for instance, provided a model, more up to date than Richardson, for the presentation of young women encountering the world; yet Fanny, with all her vigor, is a paddle-wheel steamer that churns and splashes on its zigzag course and Jane Austen is a streamlined yacht—or, at times, a submarine. But examples of re-creation need space, and this book cannot go beyond occasional brief references (some of them new, I hope).

Quotations from the text of the novels are taken from R. W. Chapman's standard edition (1923; 3rd edition, 1932–34), but not the numbering of chapters by the volume, in which he followed the original editions of three or two volumes. (Those original divisions, we may note, tended, in careful planning, to parallel the acts of a play; one example of a dramatic climax is cited below in the chapter on *Mansfield Park*.) But most readers presumably do not have Chapman's edition, and in this book references to chapters (in roman numerals) follow the consecutive numbering normally used in modern editions.

Readers will regret that the general editor, Louis Kronenberger, who had already written about Jane Austen, did not see his way to doing this volume, which was originally to be his, and passed on the assignment to me, who had already written too many books in this series.

The dedication recalls much helpful domestic debate.

D.B.

Abbreviations

Letters = *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others, collected and edited by R. W. Chapman.* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. (First published 1932; 2nd edition, 1952; reprinted with slight corrections, 1959, 1964). Quoted by permission of the publishers.

Life = William and R. A. Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters: A Family Record.* London and New York, 1913; New York, 1965.

Memoir = *Memoir of Jane Austen by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh*, ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926. The *Memoir* was first published in 1870.

M. W. = *Minor Works Now first collected and edited from the manuscripts by R. W. Chapman.* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1954; reprinted 1958. (Volume VI of Chapman's edition of the novels)

Southam = B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts: A study of the novelist's development through the surviving papers.* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Contents

1

Jane Austen's England

THE SPACIOUS HEADING promises no more than a glance at some facts, traditions, and attitudes which are part of the fabric of Jane Austen's novels because they were part of the social fabric of her age.[1] Such a reminder of ways of life that have more or less changed or vanished only separates some temporal elements from the timeless truth of the novelist's insight into human nature. And one general limitation of scope is of course her wise choice of the milieu in which she was thoroughly at home. To quote her much-quoted words about the novel her niece Anna Austen was writing, "You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life; —3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (Letter 100: September 9, 1814). We should not, though, assume that Jane Austen was retreating from normal life: a large proportion of people still lived in the country and country towns and villages,

[1] One may question the view sometimes encountered in modern criticism, that the England of the novels was far from the historical reality. Both contemporary reviewers and the numerous relatives and friends whose opinions of her books Jane Austen recorded (*M. W.*, 431–39) evidently accepted the novels as slices of the life they knew. Of course "realism" and kindred words are used of Jane Austen in the limited sense applicable to her selective and stylized pictures.

traditionally a more conservative scene than London and the smaller cities.

One elementary and conspicuous fact, which had many centuries of history behind it, was the division of social classes—though it is well to remember that, with all the social mobility of modern times, the class structure is still a fact of life in England and, with differences, in the supposedly egalitarian United States. Jane Austen is obviously not a rebel, but, as an instinctive realist, she depicts her chosen world as it is. At the same time, like other satirists, she is too clear-eyed and rational to be content with the existing world and subjects many attitudes prevalent in her stratified society to humorous ridicule or moral condemnation. Yet there have been readers—readers as different as D. H. Lawrence and Sir Harold Nicolson—who have so far failed to understand her dramatic and ironic manner of presentation (and much else) as to call her a snob. It should be transparently clear that throughout the novels Jane Austen steadily satirizes snobbery, not merely in Lady Catherine de Bourgh and the toady Mr. Collins or in Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot but in her heroine Emma Woodhouse, whose snobbery is one main cause of the harm she does to other people, and in the otherwise excellent Lady Russell, whose prejudice keeps Anne Elliot and her worthy suitor apart for eight unhappy years. Elizabeth Bennet's acute embarrassment over her ill-bred mother's inanities hardly comes under the head of snobbery.

Jane Austen always distinguishes between true and spurious gentility, between internal worth and external rank or possessions. Conventional gentility is founded on land and money (which can largely atone for inferior birth), and the rich, like General Tilney or Mrs. Ferrars or Mrs. Churchill, are seldom examples of real worth and good-breeding. The supercilious Darcy, brought up with a wrong kind of pride, falls short in goodwill and civility until he learns his lesson from Elizabeth Bennet. And many people lower in the financial and social scale are guided by false values and self-interest rather than by a sound head and unselfish heart. There is no essential difference, apart from a veneer of manners and style, between, say, Miss Bingley and the vulgar Isabella Thorpe and Lucy Steele. In a positive way, characters are distinguished in accordance with the right-

ness and fineness of their feelings and taste, and taste is a moral quality. The novels have very few characters who enjoy the author's or the reader's entire approval, and her comedies of manners have far more edged satire than unalloyed humor.

In this connection it may be observed that a prime necessity for readers of Jane Austen is to learn her language and not to be misled by its smooth surface (or, it should be added, by changes in the meaning and connotation of words). She has relatively little interest in her characters' physical appearance, but the language they use is a continual revelation of their cultural and moral standing. Characters who unthinkingly reflect the common or meretricious values of their world use words, especially such general terms as "elegant," "genteel," "gentleman," with a looseness or wrongness that indicates their more or less serious deficiencies. But the author, and the characters she presents as thoughtful and right-minded, use such terms, simple or complex, with conscious, intelligent correctness, and they carry the weight of moral, cultural, and social tradition and taste. The author could rely with some confidence on the right response from sensitive readers who shared her scale of values; and, because those values were recognized, she could use established terms not only with positive assurance but, in satirical contexts, with ironic ambiguity. One notable exemplar of linguistic and moral discrimination is Henry Tilney, who lectures Catherine Morland on her lack of verbal—that is, critical—precision; and he is only the first of the heroes who show such a concern.[2]

There is no need to comment on small matters of etiquette which belong to a society more formalized than ours, but some usages are significant for situation or character and some appear

[2] Interest in this aspect of Jane Austen has of late years amounted almost to a movement and it has refined our understanding of both her art and her cultural outlook. Some stages in the movement are: an appendix in the first volume of Chapman's edition of the novels; the chapter on style in Mary Lascelles' *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford, 1939); and some larger and later studies of varying scope: H. S. Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue* (Columbus, 1962); K. C. Phillipps, *Jane Austen's English* (London, 1970); K. Kroeber (below, c. 10, n. 2); Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (London and New York, 1972), with a bibliography on style; Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge, 1973); S. M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago and London, 1973).

to change during the course of Jane Austen's writing. One thing that strikes us as surprisingly informal is that such women as Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne can speak of or even address a man by his surname only, but this seems to be a mark of established friendship; Emma Woodhouse, in her angry catalogue of Mrs. Elton's vulgarities, exclaims first over her referring to "Knightley" (xxii). Willoughby's calling Marianne by her first name is good evidence for their being engaged. At formal parties the order of precedence for women depends on rank, marital status, and age: Lydia Bennet Wickham, quite unabashed by her belated marriage, complacently asserts her priority over her oldest sister, even at a family meal; and Elizabeth Elliot, as a baronet's daughter, has for thirteen years been "walking immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country." Her sister, Mrs. Charles Musgrove, for the same reason is always pushing ahead of her mother-in-law.

Class divisions are solidified by the fact that most genteel families have fixed roots; they live in the house where their forebears lived and represent a relatively unchanging level of civility and culture, high or low. Jane Austen, with her deep attachment to rural Hampshire, makes her strong sense of place an increasingly substantial and functional element in the novels. The title *Mansfield Park* carries full significance as the name of Sir Thomas Bertram's kingdom, which undergoes some shocks. In *Pride and Prejudice* Netherfield, Bingley's rented place, and Pemberley, Darcy's ancestral estate, are the appropriate setting for and image of their possessors. Bingley is the first "gentleman" in his line because his father left him a fortune, though very few books, and he has not yet settled down, whereas Darcy has at Pemberley a splendid library which "has been the work of many generations" (viii). Thus the mobility of the newly rich is contrasted with traditional stability. The village of Longbourn stands less for the bookish Mr. Bennet than for his foolish wife and youngest daughters, and Darcy, shortly before he proposes to Elizabeth, assumes that she has moved beyond such limitations: "*You* cannot have been always at Longbourn" (xxxii). It is significant that all the heroines except Elizabeth and Emma Woodhouse are uprooted from their homes so that they can encounter new scenes and people—and Elizabeth's two important meetings with Darcy

take place in Mrs. Collins' house and at Pemberley. In the social structure of the age and the novels places of abode are fixed points of cultural reference. This is one part, though only a part, of what Henry James called "the supreme virtue of a novel," namely, "solidity of specification."[3]

The craving to augment family wealth, power, and prestige is a prime motive among the rich or well-to-do—"They're all on the make, in a quiet way, in Jane," says a character in Kipling's *The Janeites*—and, in novels about young women, the prime field of activity is marriage. While the novels do depict happy marriages, among most of the characters the commercial view of marriage, however qualified by other considerations, is largely a matter of course. It is presented, with the author's usual irony and subtle overtones, in the opening sentences of *Mansfield Park*:

> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.

In the course of the story the Bertrams' daughter Maria—not without some abortive qualms on her father's part—escapes from home by marrying the stupid Mr. Rushworth, whose only attraction is his wealth; and that does not hold her very long.

In Jane Austen's England, although on the higher social levels parents were still active operators in the marriage market, daughters had gained far more freedom of choice than had been open to the persecuted Clarissa Harlowe. And in Jane Austen's novels, while we are kept aware of the commercial view, heroines and heroes marry for love and parents, with some exceptions, are acquiescent. Some young women—Penelope Watson, Isabella Thorpe, the Steele sisters, Mrs. Clay—have to carry on their own predatory campaigns, and they are quite ready to abandon one prey if a better one appears. But the Austen heroines, who have

[3] "The Art of Fiction," *Henry James: The Future of the Novel*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 14.

higher motives, are also on their own, and they do not need to sit like Patience on a monument—as Fanny Price does—but may, like Elizabeth Bennet, bring their loving suitors to scratch or, like even the gentle Jane Bennet, go in quest of them.

For young men, the army and navy and—not on the lowest rungs—the church and the law offer socially respectable openings to those who seek them, but young men of actual or prospective wealth do not commonly embrace a profession or settled occupation of any kind. Most "gentlemen," living on their incomes or hopes, spend their abundant leisure in the diversions prescribed by their tastes and means or debts. All the novels have examples. It is taken for granted that young men of expensive habits, like Willoughby or Wickham or William Elliot, or younger sons of good family, like Henry Tilney or Colonel Fitzwilliam (an earl's son), must marry for money or at least permit themselves to love only a well-endowed girl. On the other hand, it is assumed that young men of fortune, like Darcy and Bingley, must not marry beneath them but find wives of assured position, preferably with money too. Even Mr. Collins, a clergyman on the make who will receive the Bennet estate by entail, takes pains to learn the precise amount of money that goes with Elizabeth Bennet; refused by her, he promptly turns to Charlotte Lucas, who has no fortune but is the daughter of a knight.

All this commercialism is of course repugnant to Jane Austen, but she presents the world she knows from observation and reading, and—as in the sentences quoted from *Mansfield Park*—she can turn its own language to satirical account. But while her heroes and heroines break the accepted rules of the market, we should not expect a clear-headed realist to glorify love in a cottage—that is left to the hypocritical Isabella Thorpe and Lucy Steele. Even that romantic idealist, Marianne Dashwood, assumes that a "competence" means eighteen hundred or two thousand pounds a year; her rational sister rates one thousand as wealth. Critics have quoted Lord David Cecil's saying, that in Jane Austen's moral-realistic view it is wrong to marry for money but silly to marry without it.[4] Yet, though the first half of this dictum has abundant support in the novels, the second half, while

[4] *Jane Austen* (Cambridge and New York, 1935), 33.

in accord with our general notion of Jane Austen's common sense, gets much less illustration. At any rate the last completed novel, *Persuasion*, might (with qualifications) be called a moving plea for love and risk against worldly prudence.

The case of Charlotte Lucas is a reminder that for the multitude of genteel young women there were only three prospects: marriage, aging spinsterhood at home, or becoming a governess or teacher in a school. Charlotte, to be sure, is much less sensitive than her friend Elizabeth Bennet, but she is twenty-seven, she has never been "romantic," and she asks "only a comfortable home" (xxii); and she finds a tolerable degree of happiness, if not in the companionship of her husband and the patronage of Lady Catherine, at least in her house and parish and poultry. But the life of a governess means ill-paid drudgery and social subservience, with no hope of amelioration or escape—unless perhaps one is a Jane Eyre or Becky Sharp. In *The Watsons* Emma and Elizabeth view the lot of a teacher with horror. Emma Woodhouse's Miss Taylor, who becomes a loved companion and friend and then a happy wife and a figure in Highbury, is a unique exception to the rule. In the same novel, Jane Fairfax has hitherto had a similarly happy life in the Campbell family, but her imminent entry into the governess market arouses deep commiseration: she herself speaks of looking up "Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect."

Of the kinds and degrees of poverty and misery in the new manufacturing towns, or even among agricultural laborers, Jane Austen was not in a position to acquire first-hand knowledge. But, as the daughter of a village clergyman, she was aware of the poor around her, and she seems to have done her share of parish visiting and charitable giving. She had little money to give, but "Her needlework was nearly always a garment for the poor" (*Life*, 242). Public agitation and legislation on behalf of the submerged nine-tenths had for the most part to wait for the Victorian age; earlier, what help was supplied came largely from private charity. Emma Woodhouse, however snobbish on higher levels, is generous in giving time and aid to the poor of her neighborhood. Before the Elliot family's enforced departure from Kellynch, Anne alone pays visits to the small tenants. One of Darcy's many virtues, according to his housekeeper, is his