

RICHARD GILL & SUSAN GREGORY

MASTERING

THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, 1811

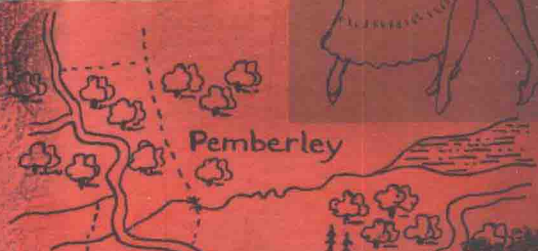
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, 1813

MANSFIELD PARK, 1814

EMMA, 1816

NORTHANGER ABBEY, 1818

PERSUASION, 1818



*It is a truth universally acknowledged
that a single man in possession
of a good fortune, must be in want
of a wife. However little known
the feelings of the world*

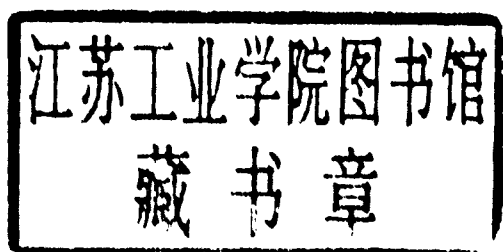




Mastering

The Novels of Jane Austen

Richard Gill
and
Susan Gregory



palgrave
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For Pat and in memory of Ken



Preface

Many people read Jane Austen's work because they find her entertaining and invigorating. Jane Austen is funny, and her, at times, outrageous preoccupation with 'Mighty Aphrodite' gives her work energy and wide-ranging appeal. Jane Austen is one of the few authors whose novels students of English have read for themselves, and she features prominently in discussions of books by people who have no professional interest in literature. Jane Austen's tone is laconic, engaged, detached, amused, askance and angry by turns. Virginia Woolf observes that 'Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off' (*The Common Reader*, 1st ser., The Hogarth Press, 1975, p. 176).

Moreover, Jane Austen's story lines are strong. Her style is witty, direct, elegant, above all supple. Her writing is robust and rigorous and it makes demands. It engages – and it defies – the reader. Jane Austen is strenuous in her moral awareness. Virginia Woolf traces her moral charge to her wit and to 'an exquisite discrimination of human values'. She continues:

The wit of Jane Austen has for partner the perfection of her taste. Her fool is a fool, her snob is a snob, because he departs from the model of sanity and sense which she has in mind, and conveys to us unmistakably even while she makes us laugh. (*The Common Reader*, p. 177)

Sometimes Jane Austen is uncomfortably exacting; *Mansfield Park* is a novel that divides opinion, perhaps because readers feel the standards required – and not just the moral standards – make *too* many demands.

Exacting also are the claims upon the attention of the reader. This is not to say that Jane Austen's novels are difficult 'to get through'. The experience of generations is that they are not. But we are required to follow the implications of the texts. Readers have to look back, to make connections, to exercise their aesthetic, social and moral sense and to supply what is not there. Jane Austen invites us to collaborate with her. She makes novelists of us all.

The implications in the text are often concerned with characters. From the light sketches through to the richness of her central figures, Jane Austen's men and women have the ability to provoke readers. Provoke, that is, to speculation. A dangerous and unscrupulous pursuit, according to most critics, who, honourably, wish students to contextualize, not fantasize. But one which the lay reader may find it difficult to resist.

Nevertheless, we would advise against speculation of the kind we occasionally engage in when it comes to public examinations. For this reason we signal carefully where we have permitted ourselves this indulgence. But we reserve the right, as countless readers have done before us, tentatively to plug some provocatively provided gaps. Readers may choose to play this game in their own way.

We have also found it rewarding to consider the occasional event which, by historical accident not connected with plot, may throw into yet sharper relief the profundity of Jane Austen's achievement.

Of course, at every turn, we shall have missed a great deal. Jane Austen wrote that her books were not for 'such dull elves / As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves' (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Friday 29 January 1813). It is *the* challenge for all who encounter her to try not to be accounted one!

Jane Austen shares a quality with authors such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Dickens: her works are receptive to different interpretative approaches. This is not just a case of how amenable the novels are to structural or stylistic readings; they are, but so are all literary works. They also yield up satisfactorily when read in the light of history and politics.

It is perhaps not surprising that the novels have received interpretations based on the politics of feminism; each of them is female-centred. Fanny Price, valued by Sir Thomas Bertram for her 'persuadableness' (vol. 2, ch. 10), resists male persuasion with the plain defiance of common sense: 'I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself' (vol. 3, ch. 4).

Political readings must have seemed impossible at one time – no mention of the French Revolution – but now, or, rather, since Alistair Duckworth and Marilyn Butler, it seems natural to read Jane Austen's books in the light of contemporary attitudes to women, tradition and innovation. The increased interest in political readings has naturally generated work on Jane Austen's relation to her own society. Roger Sales's work is of especial value in this area.

We have not sought to give a systematic reading of the novels from one critical perspective. Many of the issues dealt with have become part of the tradition of Jane Austen criticism. In terms of historical context, there is an emphasis upon her Anglicanism. The Bible, the Prayer Book, the sermons of Bishop Butler and the spiritual writings of William Law have an important, though tangential, place in her thinking. We have also shown that her work has links with the philosophers of the empirical tradition. When it comes to ethics, it seems to us that there is an implicit challenge to utilitarian thinking in the novels. Jane Austen's ethical code might be described as embracing the Christian virtues, with Conscience as our guide (see 15.10).

Much critical writing about Jane Austen must deal with substantive issues such as relations within families, attachments between characters, the etiquette of conduct, perception, the difficulties of judgement, the nature of the imagination, the place of intuition, the problems of self-knowledge and the adjustment of one class to another, while acknowledging Jane Austen's wider sense of a society that is undergoing change. Most studies also engage with formal matters such as narration, plot movement, grammar, and the conventions of the comic genre.

In addition, we have found it fruitful to ponder at least three other issues. The first is topography. Jane Austen has a sharp sense of the importance of place and space. Allied to this interest are the common themes of ejection, loss of home and the search for the 'right' home. It may be that, in her concern for the spaces of home, Jane Austen reflects the plight of women in a world which assigns them a domestic role but denies them control over the places in which their roles are exercised.

A third issue is a formal one: the nuances of her vocabulary. We have found it rewarding to look at the range of meanings open to Jane Austen by consulting Johnson's *Dictionary*. Johnson, of course, is earlier, and, in addition, it does not follow that all the meanings of individual words open to Jane Austen are present when those words appear in her texts. All we are claiming is that the force of some passages is increased if we recognize some of the meanings that the words had in, or shortly before, her day.

A book on Jane Austen will never be 'finished'. She will ever stimulate, and elude. Virginia Woolf paid powerful tribute to this characteristic evasiveness:

She wishes neither to reform nor to annihilate; she is silent and that is terrific indeed. (*The Common Reader*, p. 176)

RICHARD GILL
SUSAN GREGORY



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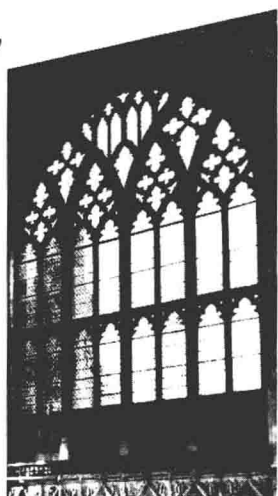
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Part I

Northanger Abbey

she is formally conducted by Dorothy the ancient housekeeper up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died, who in it about twenty years before." Northanger Abbey



Gothic

