

*P*ROGRESSIVE STATES OF MIND
DIALECTICAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF *J*ANE AUSTEN



Lyme Regis

LI-PING GENG

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Steventon Parsonage



Chawton Cottage

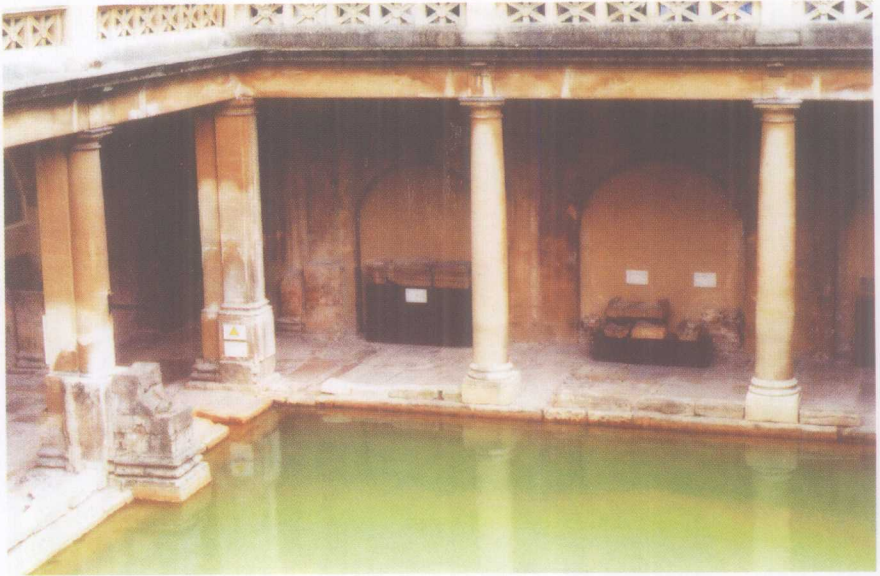


Countryside near Lyme Regis



The house on College St. in Winchester where Jane Austen passed away

(Photographs by Li-Ping Geng)



The Roman bath house



The Upper Rooms at Bath



The Cobb



The stone steps (Granny's Teeth) at the Cobb

Progressive States of Mind

**For John D. Baird who guided me
from 1998 to 1999**

Preface

In the past thirty years or so, historical studies of Jane Austen tend to characterize her novels as either conservative or radical. Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) argues that Austen's "morality is preconceived and inflexible," that she is reacting against the English Jacobin novelists of the 1790s such as William Godwin and Robert Bage. On the other hand, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984) by Mary Poovey and *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (1988) by Claudia L. Johnson contend that Austen is a feminist writer who operates in "a largely feminine tradition of political novels" (Johnson) and "both completes Wollstonecraft's analysis of female inhibition and perfects Shelley's attempt to make propriety accommodate female desire" (Poovey).

These divergent and seemingly irreconcilable views, reflecting two important aspects of Austen's literary relations with her contemporaries and immediate predecessors, reveal nevertheless two disconcerting tendencies: the tendency to highlight one narrow aspect while ignoring others, and the tendency to be prescriptive rather than descriptive. It is the view of this study that the alternatives represented by these two camps are "neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive" (Fischer), for tendencies in Austen's work seem to indicate that the author does not see her world in terms of oppression or conformation.

This book traces and identifies dialectical elements in Jane Austen's six completed novels and analyzes the working of these elements in the learning process of the protagonists. It investigates and makes clear the extent to which contrary if not contradictory elements function in her

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fiction, especially in the moral education of her protagonists. In doing so it aims to offer a comprehensive view of Jane Austen's novels.

The introductory chapter first outlines the generic change of dialectic both as an approach to and as an integral part of discourse, logic and knowledge; it then sketches relevant aspects of the political, social and literary scene in England about the time of the French Revolution; finally, it characterizes the dialectical stance taken by Austen which enables her to learn from both the conservative and the reform-minded writers of the time. Chapter 2 analyzes the dialectical nature of the plot and argues that Catherine Morland's learning experience in Volume 2 of the novel is organically connected with and significantly affected by her learning experience in Volume 1. Chapter 3 investigates the way in which the dichotomous subject matter is affected and undermined by the presence of dialectical elements in the narrative. Chapter 4 describes the role which dialectics plays in the moral transformation of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. Chapter 5 illustrates the dialectical essence in the moral growth of Fanny Price. Chapter 6 examines the dialectical process wherein Emma's moral judgment is made, and Chapter 7 dissects a series of dialectical twists that lead to the eventual reunion of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth.

The book concludes by stressing that Jane Austen is concerned with a moral and philosophical regeneration of the mind of individuals within existing social structures, that she diligently communicates such concern through the deployment and development of dialectical elements in the fabric of her narrative art, and that the resulting interplay of conservative and progressive tendencies contributes to the intellectual complexity of Jane Austen's novels.

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Finally, I thank my wife Gu Li-Ya and daughter Geng Hui, whose cheerfulness is exemplified in their joint 1997 Christmas present, a rock-shaped paperweight, bearing the inscription: Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right.

LPG
Weihai
Oct. 2006

Editions and Abbreviations

- Austen, Jane. *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. 5 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1932–1934; rpt. 1988)
- . *Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman, vol. 6 (London: Oxford UP, 1954; rpt. With further revisions B. C. Southam, 1988)
- . *Jane Austen's Letters*, collected and ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995)
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1690; Oxford: Clarendon, 1975; rpt. with corrections 1979)
- . *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* in vol. 3 of *The Works of John Locke* (1707; London, 1823; rpt. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1963)

<i>E</i>	<i>Emma</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Minor Works</i>
<i>NA</i>	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Persuasion</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>
<i>Conduct</i>	<i>Of the Conduct of the Understanding</i> (cited by section)
<i>Essay</i>	<i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> (cited by book, chapter, and section)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>Jane Austen's Letters</i> (cited by date)

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1 Introduction

In the past thirty years or so historical studies of Jane Austen have tended to fall into one of two camps. Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975; reissued with a new introduction in 1987) describes Austen as a "conservative" novelist whose "morality is preconceived and inflexible,"^① who is reacting, much in the vein of Mrs Jane West, against the English Jacobin novelists of the 1790s such as William Godwin and Robert Bage. On the other hand, Claudia L. Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (1988) portrays Austen as a progressive feminist, in the vein of "Wollstonecraft and Hays," who "center[s] her novels in the consciousness of unempowered characters—that is, women" and "exposes[s] and explore[s] those aspects of traditional institutions—marriage, primogeniture, patriarchy—which patently do not serve her heroines well."^② "In endowing attractive female characters like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet with rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence," Johnson argues, "Austen defies every dictum about female propriety and deference propounded in the sermons and conduct books which have been thought to shape her opinions on all important matters."^③

Johnson's feminist-oriented critical position is in fact a variation of

① Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 298.

② Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) xxiv. Johnson's more recent book, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s; Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) is a continuation of the same discussion.

③ Johnson xxiii. Butler, by contrast, contends that Jane Austen's "reading, in sermons and conduct-books, must have given her old-fashioned notions of social cohesion and obligation" (*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background; 1760 - 1830* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981] 102).

Mary Poovey's feminist theorizing in her book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984), in which Poovey views Austen as a sophisticated feminist who "both completes Wollstonecraft's analysis of female inhibition and perfects Shelley's attempt to make propriety accommodate female desire."^① The sophistication chiefly lies in the fact that Austen, according to Poovey, is able to introduce "the ideal of romantic love in a socially realistic fiction" by creating an alluring but ultimately pernicious illusion: "[F]reezing the narrative at the climactic moment of marriage—as Austen always does."^② Such illusion "promises women emotional fulfillment and the legitimation of their autonomy, their intensity of feeling, and even their power," making "women dream of being swept off their feet;" but it always "ends by reinforcing the helplessness that makes learning to stand on their own two feet unlikely."^③

The characteristic views of these camps, needless to say, are divergent and even seemingly irreconcilable; however, they both point to directions in which a productive investigation of Jane Austen's novels may be conducted.^④ At the same time, though, they reveal certain disconcerting tendencies: the tendency to highlight one narrow aspect while ignoring others, and the tendency to be prescriptive rather than

① Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 173.

②③ Poovey 243.

④ The directions are as many as they are varied. D. D. Devlin, for example, places Jane Austen's fiction in the educational environment of the eighteenth century, especially in relation to John Locke and Lord Chesterfield (*Jane Austen and Education* [London: Macmillan, 1975]). Roger Sales reads her fiction against such matters as domestic instability and military miscalculation that happened during and after the second Regency Crisis (*Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* [London: Routledge, 1994]). Gene Koppel explores the religious aspect in Jane Austen's novels in terms of the religious environment of the author's time (*The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1988]). Since the publication of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's ground-breaking, if also misleading, criticism of Austen's fiction in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer*

descriptive. Or in the words of Mary Waldron, the “tendency to prioritise what *we* think was important over the perceptions of the author working within the cultural parameters of his / her time.”^① Indeed some of these radically new departures in recent Austen criticism, judging the Regency author by today’s critical sentiment or even by personal preferences, make their arrivals very much in doubt.

For example, Claudia L. Johnson’s attempt to “reconceptualize the stylistic and thematic coherence of Austen’s fiction by demonstrating how it emerges, draws, and departs from a largely feminine tradition of political novels” begins by accusing “historical and biographical Austenian scholarship” in general of being “sometimes merely methodologically naive and sometimes irrecoverably entrenched in logical fallacies”^② and by attacking R. W. Chapman’s edition of Jane Austen’s novels in particular:

The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen is animated by an impulse markedly more Antiquarian than scholarly. Though acclaimed, one suspects, almost as a matter of convention, the editions themselves are hardly models of rigorous textual scholarship, and to all appearances they do not intend to be.^③

Johnson’s depreciation of Chapman’s scholarship is based on her belief that Chapman’s edition of Austen creates the author it presumed, and the history it desired. Allusions to the riots in London, or the slave trade in Antigua, for example, are first passed over, and then believed not to exist at all. With their appendixes detailing Regency fashions in clothing, carriages, and modes of address, and their chronologies of events based on almanacs, Chapman’s editions appear less to illuminate

and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), a host of feminist-oriented critics have tried to read Austen’s fiction in light of the essential argument laid out by Gilbert and Gubar. These critics will be noted and their ideas discussed in the course of this study.

① *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 12 – 13.

② Johnson xix. Johnson later names Lionel Trilling, Marvin Mudrick, Wayne C. Booth and Alistair M. Duckworth as the representatives in this category.

③ Johnson xvi.