

# Jane Austen

## Tony Tanner





# JANE AUSTEN

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Tony Tanner

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# Acknowledgements

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This book is offered as a reading of Jane Austen's novels, not as a contribution to Jane Austen scholarship. In particular, it attempts to see the novels in their relation to problems concerned with society, education and language. Hence the introductory chapter, which offers a brief discussion of the relevance of these topics before the consideration of the individual novels. The earliest chapter in the book was, substantially, written in 1966, while the most recent chapters were written this year, so the book in effect represents my thoughts about Jane Austen's work ranging, intermittently, over some twenty years. I wish to express my gratitude to Penguin Books for granting me permission to reprint – in somewhat altered form – my introductions to *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. A much earlier – and very different – version of the chapter on *Persuasion* was given as a talk to the Jane Austen Society. I am much indebted to my editor, Beverley Tarquini, for her patience, help and encouragement. The dedication is a small acknowledgement of the inestimable debt I owe to a man who has been an exemplary and incomparable friend – and 'educator' – for over twenty-five years to me and to countless others.

King's College,  
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TONY TANNER

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# 1

## Introduction

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### JANE AUSTEN AND THE NOVEL

'You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge cake is to me' – thus Jane Austen in a letter to Cassandra of 1808. Allowing for her habitual cool irony (aimed as much at herself as at others) it is hard to imagine such a sentence being written by any other major English novelist. The received image – or stereotype – of Jane Austen is that of a quiet, though brilliant, spinster living in the sheltered margin of her period. The image or stereotype has some truth – as stereotypes often do. But as many writers about Jane Austen have realised it is an image that has to be re-examined in light of her work. Austen-Leigh in his indispensable *Memoir* probably served to give authoritative status to the stereotype: 'Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course.' And he later lists some of the areas of human activity about which she never attempted to write: 'She never touched upon politics, law, or medicine', and so on. 'Science and philosophy of which I know nothing' – a quotation from a Jane Austen letter of 1815 cited by Austen-Leigh – simply serves to add to that list of what Jane Austen did *not* write about without bringing us much closer to what she did write about. He quotes from letters from Jane Austen which have since become famous, if not mindlessly overused: 'the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour'. Yes, we know about 'those two inches of ivory', but, since there seem to be people who can inscribe most of the New Testament on a pin's head, and since there have certainly been artists who worked yards of ivory with no residue of interest to engage us, we may say that the question is not one of dimensions but, rather, what did she inscribe on those (metaphorical) two inches of ivory?

Jane Austen – unwittingly surely, since her letters do not read

as if they were indirectly addressed to posterity – seems to collude or agree about the necessarily restricted range of her work: ‘Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on. . . .’ This would seem to embrace a ‘minimalist’ if not marginal conception of her art – almost defensively so. It is rather in line with the conclusion of one of her letters of 1815 where she writes, ‘I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.’ We can accept the ‘boast’, for the ironic hyperbole thinly disguises a gay self-confidence masquerading as modest ignorance. Jane Austen was quite tolerably learned and certainly well informed. If she chose to present herself as a provincial spinster enjoying (or suffering) a very limited horizon of contemporary experience and, more generally, contemporary academic, philosophic and literary work, then that must have been because she realised (or decided) that she was not in any way going to compete with, say, Richardson and Scott – to mention no more. How it was that her own ‘modest’ works came to be held in more esteem and regard even than the work of those great authors can perhaps only be ascribed to the magic, or what James would call ‘the madness’, of art.

It seems that we should look in vain for evidence in her work of many of the main historical and political events which occurred during her lifetime. She saw – or lived through – the French Revolution, the rise (and fall) of Napoleon Bonaparte; the American War of Independence (and the war with England of 1812). She died (1817) midway between Waterloo (1815) and Peterloo (1819) and she lived through much of the turmoil which accompanied what E. P. Thompson has described as ‘The Making of the English Working Class’ (1780–1832 in Thompson’s version). She must also have been aware of the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin struggle which went on in England as a result of the French Revolution, a struggle most easily (though not adequately) described as the opposition of the views expressed in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) and in Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791). These tumultuous revolutions, changes and arguments seem to have left very little mark on her fiction, and yet of course she knew what was going on. What effect, if any, all these events had in her writing we shall have to consider in due course.

It is easy enough to draw up a list of what Jane Austen seems to have 'left out' or *not* written about, though as we can see from a brief glance at the biographical details of her and her family's lives she was certainly aware – or made cognisant of – more than appears in her fiction. There she restricted herself to the point where we should do well perhaps to think again about what she did in fact put *in*. We should not expect to find, for instance, anything in Jane Austen's work like the following passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849):

Time wore on and spring matured. The surface of England began to look pleasant: her fields grew green, her hills fresh, her gardens blooming; but at heart she was no better: still her poor were wretched, still their employers were harassed: commerce, in some of its branches, seemed threatened with paralysis, for the war continued; England's blood was shed and her wealth lavished: all, it seemed, to attain most inadequate ends. Some tidings there were indeed occasionally of successes in the Peninsula, but these came in slowly; long intervals occurred between, in which no quote was heard but the insolent self-felicitations of Bonaparte on his continued triumphs. Those who suffered from the results of the war felt this tedious and – as they thought – hopeless struggle against what their fears or their interests taught them to regard as an invincible power, most insufferable: they demanded peace on any terms: men like Yorke and Moore – and there were thousands whom the war placed where it placed them, shuddering on the verge of bankruptcy – insisted on peace with the energy of desperation.

They held meetings; they made speeches; they got up petitions to extort this boom: on what terms it was made they cared not.

All men taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies they are intensely so. The British merchant is no exception to this rule: the mercantile classes illustrate it strikingly. These classes certainly think too exclusively of making money: they are too oblivious of every national consideration but that of extending England's (*i.e.* their own) commerce. Chivalrous feeling, disinterestedness, pride in honour, is too dead in their hearts. A land ruled by them alone



would too often make ignominious submissions – not at all from the motives Christ teaches, but rather from those Mammon instils. (Ch. 10)

Since the Peninsular War began in 1809 and the war(s) with Bonaparte dominated English national concerns for the first quarter of the nineteenth century – until the decisive battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815, two years before Jane Austen's death); and since – looking at home affairs, although the exigencies of the war had their effect here of course – the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 were clearly aimed at suppressing the trade unions forming among the textile workers of Yorkshire and Lancashire, there were Scarcity riots in and around 1800, there were the Luddite riots in 1811, in which frames were broken in Nottingham, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, and there was a great deal of disturbance and discontent among the artisans in the West Riding from 1811 to 1815 – just noting these facts we can see that Charlotte Brontë's novel was set in the period which fell within the second half of Jane Austen's life and her most prolific creative years. We can also see that we should have little notion of these momentous internal and external events simply by reading her novels. To quote only one writer, who has made a point made by many others in various ways, reading Jane Austen's novels 'it would take an abnormally acute reader to realise that there had been a war on at all' (Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *The Squire and his Relations*). As we shall see, it certainly would not have taken an 'abnormally acute' reader to gather from Jane Austen's novels that there had been a war on: indeed, it would have taken an abnormally obtuse one *not* to gather just that, particularly a reader of *Persuasion* but also a reader of *Pride and Prejudice*. More generally, it has become clear that Jane Austen was much more aware of contemporary events, debates and issues, of the wars and domestic unrest, of the incipiently visible results of the Industrial Revolution, and of a radical change taking place in the constitution of English society, than the conventional view allows, or perhaps wants to allow.

A related objection, and potentially a more serious one, is that Jane Austen not only did not know what was going on historically but also remained blithely and comfortably unaware of the prevailing Tory ideology which informed her work, writing

uncritically from its assumptions and classifications and within the boundaries of its rigid and foreclosing prejudices. Here is one of the more intelligent, if more extreme, versions of this criticism:

Many critics continue to venerate Jane Austen as a great artist who is also and inseparably a great 'moralist', while doggedly refusing to discuss the way her work mediates contemporary ideological, moral and social conflicts, unwilling or unable to discuss the way it is informed by a peculiarly Tory ideology and its incoherence. The consequence of this ideology is that instead of her art opening out gentry/middle-class reality and assumptions to a genuinely exploratory fiction which takes alternative forms of life and aspiration seriously, Jane Austen systematically closes up her imagination against critical alternatives. In doing so, her art, her religion, her morality and her version of the individual and community quite fail to transcend the narrow limitations of her historical class, albeit a class whose dominant role in English society is still very evident.

(David Aers, 'Community and Morality: Towards Reading Jane Austen', in *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765–1830*)

That Jane Austen held many Tory sympathies need hardly be questioned; but it does not follow that her work is uncritical of her society in many profound ways. It surely is. And there is another way of looking at this problem of the writer's relationship to the prevailing ideology of his or her time. Thus, according to Althusser, the works of a writer such as Balzac make us see the ideology from which they are born *because* they remain within that ideology, not because they transcend it. In fact Jane Austen partly remains within the ideology of her class and partly (and increasingly) transcends it. I would argue that almost everything David Aers says about Jane Austen is misleading or wrong, and testifies to another kind of misreading. Even his assertion that Jane Austen 'systematically closes up her imagination against critical alternatives' is an error, as the most superficial reading of *Persuasion* immediately demonstrates. As I hope will be apparent by the end of this book, to my mind it is clear that Jane Austen does both expose and criticise the



ideological assumptions which ground her society and which may seem to constrain her fiction. If in *some* ways Jane Austen's vision is complicit with the dominant ideology of her class, in other ways it very clearly transcends it – for by how few of her characters taken from that class is she or her writing deceived, or 'taken in'!

What really matters in the work of any writer is not the degree or kind of referentiality or content. Rather it is the writer's moral relation to language. The overriding concern of Jane Austen's novels – and of many of her heroines – is the nature of true utterance. Language, to state the obvious, is the most important distinguishing mark of the human. But, equally obviously, it is everywhere abused, often to cruel and terrible ends. Jane Austen enacts and dramatises the difficulties, as well as the necessity, of using language to proper ends. Just as thoughtless or perverse use of language can be the most insidious destroyer of the human, so the most responsible employment of language (and at times silence) not only makes for the dignity of the human but has powers and strengths of salvation. When Fanny Price – 'the lowest and last' as Mrs Norris insists – defies all the powers seeking to persuade or coerce her to marry Henry Crawford, finally even defying the awesome patriarchal authority of Sir Thomas Bertram by saying, 'I – I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him', she is refusing a false discourse and a false economics of affection whereby marriage was subject to the prevailing ethos of market values. She is a true speaker. And all of Jane Austen's novels portray a movement towards true seeing and true speaking. This movement is more difficult for some than others – Fanny Price seems to have these gifts from the beginning even in her most unprivileged situations. 'I was quiet but I was not blind', she says, and it summarises her stance and position for much of the novel. Emma on the other hand is an arrant 'imaginist' and has to be tutored, by experience and by Mr Knightley, into correct vision and responsible speech. Anne Elliot has to move, painfully, from an excessive prudence (and arguably repression) to a fuller degree of articulateness and a more comprehensive confrontation of her true feelings. But one way or another all the heroines achieve the desired end. Those characters who do not either disappear into misery or continue

blindly on in their confident unseeing and their empty words and meaningless stereotypical utterances.

To return, briefly, to the quotation from *Shirley*. It is generally agreed that Charlotte Brontë's attempt to broaden the landscape of her novel, to provide a larger social context for the love stories, in many ways did not succeed nor did it make the novel more successful than, say, *Jane Eyre*. The almost documentary amplification of the passional interests and intensities of the novel, though not without its interest and relevance, does not finally have that kind of almost obsessive life and intensity which we associate with the best of her work. We cannot say that Jane Austen's work is the poorer for lacking such overtly topical passages of social history and comment. Let me quote one more passage, from a novel actually contemporary with Jane Austen:

A mild romantic gentle-tempered youth, bred up in dependence and stooping patiently to the control of a sordid and tyrannical relation, had suddenly, by the rod of oppression and the spur of injured feelings, been compelled to stand forth a leader of armed men, was earnestly engaged in affairs of a public nature, had friends to animate and enemies to contend with, and felt his individual fate bound up in that of a national insurrection and revolution . . . even, his love seemed to have assumed a character more manly and disinterested, as it had become mingled and contrasted with other duties and feelings.

These words refer to Henry Morton in Scott's *Old Mortality*. This was published in 1816, the same year as *Emma*, and we can recognise how inconceivable it would be to find these words in any Jane Austen novel. It is not just a matter of the difference between a male and a female author – though that surely comes into it. Jane Austen's fiction just does not include or examine a hero or heroine whose 'individual fate' becomes 'bound up' with matters and movements of wide public and historical significance. (As usual, *Persuasion* provides an exception – Captain Wentworth is just back from the wars, but of course Jane Austen's novel does not aspire to contain that part of his life.) For all her wealth and independence, even Emma's life remains intensely parochial and domestic.



At this point let me bring forward two quotations, which in their different ways point to the apparent narrowness and restrictedness of Jane Austen's fictional range of reference. First, Henry James in a letter to George Pellew written in 1883 (Pellew had written a dissertation on Jane Austen's novels on which James comments):

I could have found it in me to speak more of her genius – of the extraordinary vividness with which she saw what she did see, and of her narrow unconscious perfection of form. But you point out very well all that she didn't see, and especially what I remember not to have seen indicated before, the want of moral illumination on the part of her heroines, who had undoubtedly small and second-rate minds and were perfect little she-Philistines. But I think that is partly what makes them interesting today. All that there was of them was feeling – a sort of simple undistracted concentrated feeling which we scarcely find any more. In of course an infinitely less explicit way Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot give us as great an impression of 'passion' – that celebrated quality – as the ladies of G. Sand and Balzac. Their small gentility and front parlour existence doesn't suppress it, it only modifies the outward form of it. You do very well when you allude to the narrowness of Miss Austen's social horizon – of the young Martin in *Emma* being kept at a distance, etc.; all that is excellent.

For James there *was* 'passion' in the 'front parlour existence' of Austen's heroines, though he regards them as having 'small and second-rate minds' and as being 'perfect little she-Philistines'. Which is perhaps a little hard on, say, Elizabeth Bennet to go no further. And 'want of moral illumination'? That surely is a rather surprising judgement if we think of Emma, Anne Elliot, even Fanny Price. Perhaps, indeed assuredly, 'moral illumination' does not come to them in the way it comes to, say, Isabel Archer, or Strether; but that it comes, whatever James might have meant by 'moral illumination', there can be no doubt. Indeed, while we all agree that James could scarcely have written as he did without George Eliot and Balzac (not to mention Hawthorne) behind him, it seems to me quite as arguable that James learned as much from

Jane Austen as Jane Austen did from Richardson. Which is to say, a great deal.

James is surely exaggerating when he maintains that Jane Austen's heroines are composed exclusively of 'feeling', for while he is absolutely right to point to the undistracted and undistractable intensity of feeling of which they are capable (we might remember the 'undiverted heart' of Catherine Sloper in James's *Washington Square*, who loves intensely, silently and unrequitedly in the 'front parlour existence' which is finally her fate and doom – she is a Jamesian version of one kind of Jane Austen heroine), this hardly does justice to the wit, ironic reflectiveness and moral intelligence which, to varying degrees, characterises them. It is true that, even by Jamesian standards, there are very few significant events in their lives (no visits to Italy – or even London), but even apparent eventlessness can be an event of cardinal importance in those parlours in which what James took to be those mentally second-rate and Philistine heroines had too often to eke out – and make out – their politely but cruelly constricted lives. How little relevant this may have seemed to someone coming to the parlour room of English society of the time may be instanced by the second quotation, from Emerson's journals (1861):

I am at a loss to understand why people hold Miss Austen's novels at so high a rate, which seem to me vulgar in tone, sterile in artistic invention, imprisoned in the wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit, or knowledge of the world. Never was life so pinched and narrow. The one problem in the mind of the writer in both the stories I have read, *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, is marriageableness. All that interests in any character introduced is still this one, Has he (or she) the money to marry with, and conditions conforming? 'Tis the 'nympholepsy of a fond despair', say, rather, of an English boarding-house. Suicide is more respectable.

Emerson is of course not all wrong. 'Marriageableness' is a key consideration, and as for the 'pinched and narrow' aspects of contemporary English social life with the imprisoning effect of its 'wretched conventions' – well, who made us more aware of those than Jane Austen, often through the silent agonies which her



aware, and distinctly *not* vulgar, heroines often have to suffer? They would not have found much to quarrel with in Emerson's rather crude diagnosis. But America – particularly America as Emerson conceived or dreamed of it – was simply not an available alternative. There is not a Jane Austen heroine who even begins to aspire to the imaginative condition of a Walt Whitman. At the same time we might add that it was quite beyond Emerson's capabilities, and doubtless his desires, to write a social novel, or indeed a novel of any kind. Whatever else he knew, he simply did not understand what was involved, by way of pleasure and pain, in the intricate and potentially abrasive reciprocities involved in living with – having to live with – other people within those 'wretched conventions' which were (and are) so often the condition of both the curses and blessings of whatever we choose to call civilised existence. And, while Emerson was quite ready to quit his family and house in order to commune with nature and the Over-Soul, for Jane Austen 'marriageableness' is indeed the key to existence as she knew it. While it is true that her novels depict many ill-suited couples and marriages which are prisons of *ennui* if not of torment – machines for the 'production' of misery – this is all the more reason why it is so imperative for her heroine to struggle for the right kind of marriage, which is so central to society that it cannot be written aside as Emerson seems to wish to do by making it seem a marginal and even petty concern. It is, for Jane Austen, *the* metaphor for the most desirable kind of relationship, which can both 'ground' and situate her heroines (and their husbands) and allow them more fully to live out their proper *telos* or end as women. The good marriage is also indispensable for the renewal of society. That there are so many bad, or bleakly empty marriages in Jane Austen, revealing different degrees of failed mutuality, non-reciprocation and myopic egotism or frivolous self-gratification, only underlines the imperative of finding a good marriage no matter what the obstacles, in the form of the different fragments of authority, prohibition, interdiction and coercion which circulated in that small – at times claustrophobic – society, or the difficulties and risks of opportunities and gestures of initiation and approach which were not within the power, or under the control, of the heroine. Once the full significance of a true 'marriage' in Jane Austen's works has been grasped then we will see that, Emerson

to the contrary notwithstanding, 'suicide' is hardly more 'respectable' than the concerns, anxieties and hopes which can surround (or precede) such an important matter – a matter, precisely, of *life* or a kind of death-in-life which may indeed tempt one to think that Emerson's preference for suicide might be understandable. But the Jane Austen heroine wants to live and so marriage must necessarily be her concern. (I write this in the full awareness that Jane Austen never married. That fact does not in any way invalidate the tenor or verdict of her imaginative works.)

'Why shouldn't it be argued against her that where her testimony complacently ends, the pressure of our appetite presumes exactly to begin?' asked James in 'The New Novel'. James is indirectly alluding to the fact that many of the great nineteenth-century novelists found that it was more challenging, more rewarding, more interesting to explore what happens to relationships *after* marriage than to concentrate on the delights and difficulties, the privations and problems, which precede it, the obstacles and triumphant negotiations which lead up to it. For novelists such as Flaubert, Tolstoy, George Eliot, James himself, the most serious, significant and profound (often tragic) problems *begin* with that union and contract which for Jane Austen seems to terminate and resolve all problems. This major shift or development in the scope and focus of the novel is a subject in itself. Here we can admit that we can see what James means: Jane Austen regularly avails herself of the convention of marriage-as-felicitous-closure, leaving unanswered – and unaskable – any number of potentially fascinating questions which each novel may prompt (what *will* become of Emma as Mr Knightley's wife?). But there is less 'complacency' of testimony, and more irony and covert inconclusiveness (and even overt uncertainty) in Jane Austen's novels and conclusions than James suggests by his observation. The confidence and satisfaction in 'social unions' and marriage which many critics have found in her work is by no means always unequivocal or unqualified. There is an increasingly large part of her main characters which is not so easily or happily accommodated to 'social systems' as some critics assert. Indeed, by the end of her work social systems themselves are called in question and found increasingly inadequate to satisfy her heroines' needs. Social novelist Jane Austen certainly is, but, if she does not quite envision a life in a 'world elsewhere',



she certainly sees that alternative modes of social organisation – or even extra-social forms of life – may have to be canvassed. Her novels never simply, complacently celebrate the social *status quo*. At its best, society has to be purged and reconstituted. At its worst it has to be rejected and abandoned. Jane Austen's novels do not 'perennialise' society: they problematise it.

## JANE AUSTEN AND SOCIETY

In the unfinished manuscript of *Sanditon*, the phrase 'social order' is crossed out and replaced by the more general formulation 'the common wants of society'. We could see this hesitation and erasure as indicative of Jane Austen's growing uncertainty that, by the time she came to write her last work, there *was* any meaningful 'social order' left to refer to so confidently. Just what 'society' meant for Jane Austen, it is difficult to establish. Indeed, it was a major difficulty for many eighteenth-century writers who specifically addressed themselves to this topic. David Hume, for instance, uses both 'society' and 'company' without any stable differentiation between the words. Society, company, community: it was not easy to fix the differences between them. Society as 'company' could mean a small, self-sufficient 'community', happily cut off from, or impervious to, the more anonymous conglomerate of society at large. In its more inclusive sense, 'society' could refer to the whole body of institutions and relationships which organise and maintain the whole nation state – or fail to do so. (For Hume 'company' has served to 'introduce the rules of *Good Manners or Politeness*', while 'society' has constrained mankind to 'establish the laws of justice'.) Clearly, for Jane Austen, society was much more a matter of 'company' and 'community' (face-to-face relationships) than the whole state system of institutions and relationships. She concerned herself with the 'rules of good manners or politeness' and not with questions concerning 'the laws of justice'. Yet it would be wrong to infer from this that she had no interest in, or awareness of, the larger 'society' which surrounded and contained the 'community' she wrote about. What I think we can say is that she hoped that what she had depicted as happening to the 'community' of her novels, its potentialities for self-destruction,