

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

Jane Austen



WOMEN, POLITICS,
AND THE NOVEL



11. 6d. August 1st 1798. by J. Wright N. 69. Piccadilly. for the Anti-Jacobin Magazine &

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

Jane Austen

WOMEN
POLITICS
AND THE
NOVEL



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON is assistant professor of English
at Marquette University.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1988 by The University of Chicago

All rights reserved. Published 1988

Printed in the United States of America

97 96 95 94 93 92 91 90 89 88 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, Claudia L.

Jane Austen : women, politics, and the novel /

Claudia L. Johnson

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-226-40138-3

1. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817—Political and social views.
2. Politics in literature. 3. Social problems in literature.
4. Women in literature. I. Title.

PR4038.P6J64 1988

823'.7—dc19

87-27338

CIP

FOR

Nicholas J. and E. Sandra Johnson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In one of her many enthusiastic moments, Marianne Dashwood declares, "I love to be reminded of the past . . . whether it be melancholy or gay, I love to recall it." I share Marianne's great love of remembrance, and so take particular pleasure now in thanking the many people and institutions whose assistance over the past few years has made this book and these happy recollections possible.

I am especially grateful to the Newberry Library, both for granting me a Monticello Fellowship during the years 1983–1984, when this book was first conceived, and also for continuing to support my research into its splendid holdings over the many months that have since brought this work to completion. Thanks are also due to Marquette University, to Oberlin College, and to the American Philosophical Society, all of whose generous support at various stages of my project enabled me to undertake research at the Huntington Library and at the Special Collections division of the University Research Library at UCLA.

I am much indebted to the many friends and colleagues who have been so kind as to read parts or all of this book from its beginnings to its completion. A. W. Litz, Margaret A. Doody, Dianne M. Dugaw, Jeffrey L. Spear, Edward Duffy, Christine Krueger, Thomas Jeffers, Wendy Wenner, and Albert J. Rivero have given me more than can ever be accounted for here in the way of proofreading, criticism, counsel, encouragement, and good argument. I reserve my deepest thanks for Catherine L. McClenahan, whose conversation at every stage has been a challenge, a delight, and a blessing; and most of all for Carol Kay, whose ability to bridge the learned and conversable worlds I shall always admire and strive to emulate.

Claudia L. Johnson

27 May 1987

ABBREVIATIONS

All references to Austen's writings are based on the standard editions by R. W. Chapman. Because these editions have since appeared in slightly revised and modified versions by Mary Lascelles and B. C. Southam, I mention here the dates of the issues I have used throughout this book, along with the abbreviations that will appear parenthetically in my text:

Minor Works (MW)—1980

Northanger Abbey (NA) and *Persuasion* (P)—1982

Sense and Sensibility (SS)—1982

Pride and Prejudice (PP)—1982

Mansfield Park (MP)—1980

Emma (E)—1982

Reference to Austen's letters are made parenthetically by date, and are based on the corrected, one-volume edition by Chapman printed in 1959.

INTRODUCTION



THE FEMALE NOVELIST AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION

I am quite honoured by your thinking me capable of drawing such a clergyman as you gave the sketch of in your note of Nov. 16th. But I assure you I am not. The comic part of the character I might be equal to, but not the good, the enthusiastic, the literary. Such a man's conversation must at times be on subjects of science and philosophy, of which I know nothing; or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations and allusions which a woman who like me, knows only her own mother tongue, and has read very little in that, would be totally without the power of giving. A classical education, or at any rate a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient and modern, appears to me quite indispensable for the person who would do any justice to your clergyman; and 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.

(*Letters*, 11 December 1815)

[Catherine] was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame. Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can.

(*Northanger Abbey*, 110–11)

Although Jane Austen's reputation has been secure since the mid-nineteenth century, she has remained one of the great anomalies of literary history. If few authors have occupied such an honored position in the ranks of great literature, just as few have inspired such divergent accounts of what exactly they are doing there in the first place. Accordingly, Austen has appeared to us in a number of contradictory guises—as a cameoist oblivious to her times, or a stern propagandist on behalf of a beleaguered ruling class; as a self-

effacing good aunt, or a nasty old maid; as a subtly discriminating stylist, or a homely songbird, unconscious of her art.

Such variety points to more than the vicissitudes to which the reputations of all authors are subject. It bespeaks a basic and pervasive indecision about Austen's stature as an artist, an indecision due in large part to Austen's sex. The fact that Austen is a female novelist has made assessments of her artistic enterprise qualitatively different from those of her male counterparts. Because of it, she has been admitted into the canon on terms which cast doubt on her qualifications for entry and which ensure that her continued presence there be regarded as an act of gallantry. While the novel had proved especially attractive to eighteenth-century women writers precisely because it was not already the territory of men, starting from as early as around 1815, reviewers insist on a fairly rigid distinction between the "male" and the "female" novel. Austen's famous and, it seems, ironically self-deprecating letter to her talentless nephew, in which she contrasts his "manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety and Glow," to her own "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory" (*Letters*, 16 December 1816), alludes to this emergent distinction, as does Scott's rather more earnestly self-deprecating reference to "The Big Bow-wow strain" in his own novels.¹ But the distinction between the "male" and "female" novel did not merely mark a difference, but also implied a hierarchy which reviewers sometimes made painfully explicit. One anonymous critic opens a series of articles in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1852) on "Female Novelists" by taking their inferiority as a starting point: "Perhaps, indeed—and some critics would substitute 'unquestionably' for 'perhaps'—none but a man, of first-rate power withal, can produce a first-rate novel; and if so, it may be alleged that a woman of corresponding genius (*quâ* woman) can only produce one of a second-rate order."²

The precondition of Austen's posthumous admittance into the canon was an apparent contentment to work artfully within carefully restricted boundaries which have been termed "feminine." But for those of Austen's female contemporaries who were eminent in the 1790s, this distinction was under construction. As important as gender difference was in itself, it did not confine women to a sphere in which formidable concerns could not be articulated. Review magazines of the 1790s treat female and male writers as menaces or allies of comparable magnitude. Among the monstrosities depicted in Gillray's "New Morality," which appeared in 1798 as the frontispiece to the first issue of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, is a large Cornucopia of Ignorance. From this, novels by Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft have spilled into an ignominious heap, alongside works by Wakefield, Holcroft, Paine, Tooke, and the many other progressive male authors whose pages litter the scene. In

the heat of controversies felt to shake the world, novels by women were acknowledged to express and mobilize political opinions every bit as effectively as Priestley's *Political Sermons* or Godwin's *Political Justice*. Offering little or nothing in the way of apology, women writers commonly took on urgent social, political, and theological questions, since assigned to the "masculine" sphere, and they have dropped out of later versions of literary history altogether as a result, leaving scarcely a trace. In 1814, a year after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, Fanny Burney published *The Wanderer, or, Female Difficulties*, a long and extremely ambitious novel composed largely before the turn of the century, in which she addresses many of the political and philosophical issues raised by the French Revolution, particularly as these related to the condition of women. As we shall see, there is nothing unique in Burney's having undertaken a novel of such massively political import. In fact, the only thing unusual about *The Wanderer* is that it was published so late, and that is what damned it. By 1814 the climate had changed for women writers, and the novel was stridently denounced by J. W. Croker in 1815 as the work of a shriveled hag. Novel and novelist alike have grown too old to delight discriminating male readers: "The vivacity, the bloom, the elegance, 'the purple light of love' are vanished; the eyes are there, but they are dim; the cheek, but it is furrowed; the lips, but they are withered." Just as Lord Merton had opined that women should not live after thirty, Croker implies that they should not write after thirty. Fiction by women must be fiction by young women—modest, delicate, wispy, delightful, everything he sees in *Evelina*—and as soon as a woman has anything significant to say, she is, as Croker puts it, "*épuisée*," past her career as a novelist and a woman. Accordingly, Croker ridicules Burney's effort to intensify her treatment of manners by linking them to political turmoil as the grotesque stratagem of "an old coquette . . . to compensate for the loss of the natural charms of freshness, novelty, and youth."³

Austen has been the beneficiary of these sorts of attitudes. In 1821 Archbishop Whately praises Austen for declining the didactic posture—which assumes the ambition as well as the authority to teach the public—and for opting instead to hint at matters of serious concern inobtrusively and unpretentiously.⁴ Although Whately contends that Austen's indirection and subtlety are means of instruction rather than ends in themselves, he unwittingly began a tradition of praising Austen for what she does *not* do. Victorian readers from Lewes on, perhaps uncomfortable with their own admiration for an author deficient in high seriousness, dwell just as much on what Austen would not or could not do as on what she did. Richard Simpson insists repeatedly that Austen, "always the lady," had the good sense to avoid getting out of her depth: she "never deeply

studied" the "organization of society," she had no "conception of society itself," no "idea" that clergymen and baronets speak and act in different ways.⁵ Constructing a "myth of limitation," Victorian readers posit an Austen whose mind was without what Lewes called "literary or philosophic culture," so destitute of ideas that she had no choice but to ply the miniaturist's deft but inferior art for its own sake.⁶ Thus the same modest acquiescence to work within feminine, commonplace limitations that wins Austen the indulgence of so many nineteenth-century reviewers and, in Lewes's words, a place "among great artists," also consigns her to a rank "not high among them."⁷ Given Lewes's underhanded praise of Austen's achievement, it is no wonder that George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë should be so nonplussed to find Austen thrust at them as a model of artistry.

{ It may appear ungenerous to chide nineteenth-century critics and reviewers for patronizing Austen even as they grouped her with Shakespeare, but many of their misleading premises are still with us. Nowhere is this clearer than in R. W. Chapman's editions of Austen's novels, which have now influenced more than two generations of readers. 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. Chapman's annotations to Austen's literary and historical allusions are sketchy as a matter of editorial principle—his purpose having been, as Mary Lascelles informs us, only "to give to the text of an outstanding novelist care and attention *comparable to but not identical with* that hitherto reserved for classical authors and some English poets and dramatists" (P, 316, emphasis added). Chapman does not grant Austen "identical" attention because he evidently does not consider her to be a major author in the same sense that other authors are major authors. In the *Jane Austen Bibliography*, he dismisses Samuel Kliger's study of Austen's "neo-classicism" with telling annoyance: "the essay is polysyllabic, and open to the familiar objection that its subject would not have understood it."⁸ Presumably because her sex made formal schooling impossible, Austen is held to be as removed from the sophisticated preoccupations of high culture as she is ignorant of the formidable rigors of big words—words which turn out to be as inoffensively elementary to eighteenth-century usage as "premeditated" and "antithesis."

Following Chapman, many an Austenian, amateur and professional alike, appealing to historical authority as well as decorum, has implied that her novels are off limits to the ponderous diction of literary scholarship. Since Austen herself would, as Chapman writes, "turn over in her grave" if she heard scholars describe her novels in tastelessly highfalutin

terms, the apparatus of literary history and textual scholarship would misrepresent her enterprise. To Chapman, Austen is in the canon not because of her social vision or even because of her formidable artistry, but rather because she had the good fortune to be able and the good taste to be willing to record the elegant manners of her time.⁹ And so, with an inexorable circularity, 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 to honor Austen's compositional process than to preserve the novels in a museumlike world situated somewhere between fiction and real life. As such, *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen* is a graceful monument to country life in Regency England, a time which twentieth-century readers have been prone to idealize into graciousness and tranquillity.

Normally, the publication of handsome, ostensibly "authoritative" editions is a signal that an author has been accepted as a serious contributor to the literary tradition, and is a call for scholars to elucidate his or her relationship to that tradition. But even though Austen studies have since become an industry of sorts, this process of legitimization could never be completed in her case. What Chapman pejoratively called the "philosophical approach" to Austen was in fact absurd, for the basic strategies of literary history—with its patrilineal models of influence and succession—are indeed inappropriate when applied to an author marginalized from the outset, an author agreed to be unconcerned with, probably even oblivious to, authors who make up the tradition. Scholars of course acknowledge that Austen avidly read the works of female novelists. But since these authors are likewise considered peripheral to the prestigious ranks of literary culture, they have not much counted. Thus while historical scholars since Chapman have attempted in a sense to justify the *Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, as Chapman himself did not, by affiliating Austen with important male authors or with pressing social and political issues, they deny her any direct access or pondered relation to them. Whether linking her to Shaftesbury, Rousseau, or Burke, for example, critics shuffle in fear of granting Austen too much, and taking away with one hand what they have given with the other, they couch their arguments about her intellectual antecedents and leanings in the vaguest possible terms of "affinity," "temperament," or "unconscious awareness."¹⁰ Even Marilyn Butler—who has argued persuasively for Austen's relationship to the postrevolutionary "war of ideas"—contends at last not that her ideas were engaged and developed by that very war, but rather

that "old-fashioned notions" were "given to her" by the "sermons" and "conduct books" that somehow "formed" her mind.¹¹ This account, however, actually denies Austen the dignity and the activity of being a warrior of ideas. Far from ever having wielded any herself, she purportedly imbibed the tendentious and intrinsically conservative propaganda she is imagined to have been indoctrinated with since childhood, without being able or inclined to consider the interests served by its representations. Having concluded that Austen's politics are unstintingly anti-Jacobin, and her morality so "preconceived and inflexible" as to preclude any interest in exploring or complicating the subjectivity of her characters, Butler is ready to subvert the premise which, in some ways, makes her own book possible, and to ask, with admirable, if perverse logic, whether Austen really does deserve her position in the canon: "[A]re we right to call her a great novelist at all?"¹²

The attempt of modern scholars to justify Austen's inherited place in the canon has been unsuccessful because we have not reconsidered how our assumptions about the education and attitudes available to Austen as a woman—assumptions which in turn depend on questionable versions of social and literary history—have stacked the deck against her from the start. If few go so far as Butler in seeing Austen as a propagandist for the reaction, most do agree that she is a "conservative." Yet when we scrutinize the bases on which this opinion rests, we find the question almost entirely begged. Assertions about her "Tory conservatism" are based not on statements by or about Austen in her novels or letters—no such statements exist—but rather on the belief that because she was a member of a certain class she reflexively accorded with all its values and interests. It is no accident, of course, that as modern readers find themselves more nostalgic for the stateliness and stability Austen's world is said to apotheosize, Austen's class gets higher and higher, and she herself is claimed to be more and more conservative. In her own time, this was hardly the case. Sir Walter Scott—who ought to know—contended that Austen's characters belong "chiefly to the middling classes of society," and Madame de Staël nailed Austen's work with devastating concision, "*vulgaire*."¹³ In our own century, however, Lord David Cecil has attempted to co-opt Austen, now the arbitress of good breeding, into the aristocracy. Even though Austen's father was propertyless, and even though she spent her most productive years as what Barbara Pym would call a "distressed gentlewoman," many readers contend that Austen was a socially confident member of the landed gentry and, with that, the "ruling class."¹⁴ But whatever the station to which Austen is now assigned, she is not held to entertain an opinion independent of it. She is the "parson's daughter" or the "sailors' sister," and the mere identification of her kinship relations

to the men in her family is judged enough to warrant the inference that her social opinions affirmed theirs as a matter of course.

Contrary to what one might expect, readers who by contrast consider Austen "subversive"—that is to say, at odds with the dominant values of her society—do not credit her with any corollary capacity for independence. Their conceptions of Austen's achievement are limited in identical ways by fixed and curiously unimaginative suppositions about what was possible, proper, and normal for women of her time. To them, Austen's social criticism is not the result of a reasonably considered outlook on society, or even of a simple ability to detect fools and knaves. Rather it is a symptom of emotional disability: she was a "nasty" old maid. Austen's most recent biographer is one of many to have considered his own absence to be the most remarkable and the most significant feature of Austen's life. The ironic conclusion of *Northanger Abbey*, by this account, reflects "Jane's" resentful realization that the happy ending of marriage would not bless her own life: Austen's peace "was surely on the brink of destruction, in her early twenties, as a result of loneliness, of sexual longing. *Northanger Abbey* shows her asking the old question: Where is the man for me?"¹⁵ Statements such as these carry with them the implication that Austen's irony, her single most brilliant artistic achievement, was pathological, a problem any good husband could relieve, and that all social criticism written by women is borne of disappointment in love. Croker, it would appear, lives on.

Surveying more than a decade of Austenian criticism, one reviewer has suggested that the only genuinely "unanachronistic" Austen is the Tory conservative, and that modern approaches averring otherwise—feminist, Freudian, or Marxist discussions, for example—will finally appear ephemeral and wearisomely proliferative in the face of the sensibly corrective authority of "historical" scholarship.¹⁶ But as we have seen, historical and biographical Austenian scholarship, sometimes merely methodologically naive and sometimes irrecoverably entrenched in logical fallacies, has always been preceded by very definite ideas about what it would find there. And in its decidedly modern nostalgia for an unalienated relationship to a calmer, more manageable world, it has not been fundamentally less skewed by modern projections than the readings historicists have deemed anachronistic.

The purpose of this study is not to eschew the historical approach to Austen, but rather to adopt it critically in order 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, novels which are highly informed and often distinctively flexible, rather than ferociously partisan, in their sympathies. It is no longer

possible, and no longer even necessary, to claim that I have constructed an ideologically objective or neutral methodology which transcends my own historicity as an investigator. The reader will observe that feminist theory and scholarship, as well as the new social and literary history, underpin my procedures.¹⁷ But once my own historical perspective is acknowledged, it is not necessary to concede that it will be an impediment to inquiry. In fact, a consciousness of how the private is political, and a sensitivity to the problems women writers encounter living and writing in a male-dominated culture, can provide us with special grounds for a historical understanding of Austen's work. Few ostensibly "historical" truths are as stubbornly persistent and as entirely ahistorical as the belief that, with the exception of a few unseemly radicals, Austen and her ladylike contemporaries were not curious about or concerned with the moral implications of gender distinctions, and that as a sensible woman, Austen never mixed with the political debates of her time. Indeed, modern critics tend to view politics much as Catherine Morland viewed history—as a sphere "with men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all" (NA 108). But in the eighteenth-century novel this was not so. In general it never confined itself within the tidy disciplinary or sexual boundaries we have since drawn. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Rasselas*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*, for example, spill over into economics, philosophy, politics, religion, and conduct literature, and the novels written by Austen's female predecessors and contemporaries are no exception. Freely adapting works by Bolingbroke, Locke, Hume, not to mention Shakespeare, Burney's *The Wanderer* discourses at great length on suicide, the immortality of the soul, and the sentience of matter. Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) extensively excerpts and footnotes Godwin's *Political Justice*. Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* (1798), Sophia King's *Waldorf, Or, The Dangers of Philosophy* (1798), to name only a very few, assimilate or directly allude to Rousseau, Burke, Wollstonecraft, and Holcroft. In contrast to modern readers and writers, who draw the line between public and private at the threshold of an Englishman's home and then assign women to that apolitical space within its doors, late-eighteenth-century women read and wrote novels that undertook either to defend the nation from the contagion of "Jacobinism" or to improve the nation by pointing to the need for social reform. Dramatically exploring the philosophical rallying cries invoked on both sides of the debate—the catchwords about liberty, prejudice, reason, sensibility, authority, happiness—the feminine tradition of the novel was, pace Chapman, a "polysyllabic" one, and Austen, a compulsive reader of novels, was thoroughly acquainted with it.¹⁸

In reexamining the political ambience of Austen's fiction and that of her contemporaries, I depart from previous arguments in three related ways. First, avoiding the rhetorical traps set by the disputants themselves, I investigate a wide spectrum of responses to the social questions raised in England by the revolution in France. Political analysis cannot be left at the level of identifying an author's sympathies with this or that administration. Most of the novels written in the "war of ideas" are more complicated and less doctrinaire than modern commentators have represented. It does not suffice to denominate writers as "conservative" or "radical" according to whether they were "for" or "against" the French Revolution. By the mid-1790s, with France and England at war and the Revolution and Terror faits accomplis, there were few English "Jacobins" around, and among professed "anti-Jacobins," there is far more disagreement than first meets the eye.¹⁹ To be sure, West and More idealize and defend established power—power which, as we shall see, they do not hesitate to call by its proper name: "patriarchal." But Hamilton and Opie, for example, do not endorse the status quo without serious qualifications. They dutifully denounce reformist zeal, only to tuck away parallel plots which vindicate liberty, private conscience, and the defiance of authority, and thus discretely define broad areas where conservatives and progressives could agree, surely no part of the reactionary program. To group these authors together indiscriminately as "anti-Jacobin" is not only to blur crucial political distinctions, but it is also to overlook entirely the social and aesthetic problems authors face during times of reaction. Austen and her less-doctrinaire contemporaries do indeed participate in a polemical tradition, but to invoke a polemic is not necessarily to accept completely the loaded terms on which it is conducted or to endorse the foregone conclusions to which it invariably tends. Under the pressure of intense reaction, they developed stylistic techniques which enabled them to use politically charged material in an exploratory and interrogative, rather than hortatory and prescriptive, manner.

Secondly, though it is sometimes approached as if it rose out of a vacuum, I argue that the debate between "conservative" and "reformist" camps which informs the novels Austen read from the beginning through the end of her career must be placed in its prerevolutionary context of thought about rights, education, authority, happiness, and free agency if we are to appreciate what is distinctive about it. Before the French Revolution, Lockean ideas about happiness, education, judgment, autonomous choice, and the limited though necessary role of authority enjoyed general currency, and the English gentry, proud of its independence and suspicious of aristocratic prejudices, was wary of encroachments on its own authority. Later in the century, conservative observers

opposed to reform were bewildered to find progressive rhetoric co-opting the positive valency of these very terms.²⁰ What had been an established tradition of political discourse wielded by guardians of the status quo could now be tapped by reformists' interests, and once the reaction was in full swing, ideas which before had been safe and acceptable enough now seemed to be pernicious doctrines: acknowledging pleasure and pain as moral prompters, as had Samuel Johnson, Austen's "favorite moralist" in prose, now could sound like proclaiming the primacy of license over duty; cherishing one's independence now could sound like the stubborn will to defy time-honored authorities and established forms.

Because the code words of conservative and reformist polemicists were not at first antithetical, but in fact often share a common tradition, representations of social and political debates in fiction are rarely as pat as modern commentators have considered them. As the matter is currently accepted, for example, "sensibility" is the cherished rallying cry of reformists, and it is lambasted by conservatives because it is said to promote dangerous moral relativism, to valorize unruly, generally sexual energies, and to foster radical individualism, instead of encouraging submission to social control. But "sensibility" is also the rallying cry of Burkean reactionaries who, anxious to discredit the presumptuous calculations of independent reason, cherish instead "feelings" and "affections" cultivated through the family. This overlay of politically sensitive terms surfaces in Austen's fiction, as in that of others, in illuminating and complicating ways. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, the "conservative" argument in behalf of sensibility is articulated by two of the novel's most abhorrent characters—Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood, who use their tender solicitude for the future of their infant heir as an excuse to cheat their female relations out of their patrimony. Conversely, when Marianne Dashwood challenges the justice of social conventions which require her to conceal honorable affections, she bases her argument on an appeal to *reason*, not on an appeal to the sanctity of individuals' feelings. Thus the fact that *Sense and Sensibility* shatters Marianne's vehement feelings is surely no proof that Austen is a conservative. Even though Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) presented her as a Rousseauvian heroine of sensibility, Mary Wollstonecraft herself is more suspicious of sensibility than Austen is, and in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, a novel deemed "anti-Jacobin," Hamilton praises Wollstonecraft generously for refuting Rousseau's recommendation of sensibility. The rhetoric of "sensibility" is, then, fully as volatile as that of "true liberty." Because Austen and many of her contemporaries are fully aware that the codes employed by the two opposing camps are not always so discrete and mutually exclusive,

they are more able to take a measured view of social and political problems, and are more willing to give quarter to opposing platforms than their more partisan counterparts.

Finally, unlike many previous commentators, I consider Austen's sex to be a crucially significant factor, not only in the formation of her social opinions, but also in the development of aesthetic strategies for writing about them. This is only fitting, since the idea that great literature is genderless was entirely alien to Austen's generation, particularly traumatized as it was by social upheaval. Years ago, Lionel Trilling observed that Emma Woodhouse was remarkable for having "a moral life as a man has a moral life."²¹ Unable, like so many of his forebears, to credit Austen with a bright idea, Trilling quickly reassures us that Austen surely had no ax to grind in presenting Emma as a "new woman." But in fact, the extent to which women have or ought to have moral lives in the same way men have moral lives was very hotly and accessibly debated in Austen's time, as were other issues pertaining to female sexuality in particular and sexual difference in general. In endowing attractive female characters like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet with rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence, 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. Although many novels written from the beginning until the end of Austen's career referred positively or negatively to *The Rights of Woman*, no allusions were necessary to remind audiences that female characterization, such as Emma's or Fanny's, was already a politicized issue in and of itself, and Austen's handling of this problem is perhaps the most independent of all her contemporaries.

But for a woman novelist writing at the end of the eighteenth century, the issue of gender affected more than choices of characterization, and indeed it eventually called into question the act of authorship itself. No woman novelist, even among the most progressive, wished to be discredited by association with Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly after Godwin's widely attacked *Memoirs* disclosed details about her sexual improprieties and suicide attempts. Moreover, as the reaction intensified, the fear of being branded a treasonous Jacobin obliged moderately progressive novelists to appear more conservative than they really were. Their horror at the Revolution and Terror notwithstanding, Burney, Edgeworth, Hamilton, and Opie—conservatives all by most reckonings—feel in varying degrees too marginal as women in their society to idealize established power, too compromised by the customary social structures which conservative discourse upholds. As a consequence, they smuggle in their social criticism, as well as the mildest of reformist