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Jane Austens' Attitude Toward the Position of Women

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JANE AUSTEN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE POSITION OF WOMEN

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Jane Austen's attitude toward the position of middle-class women at the end of the eighteenth century is examined in the context of her life and thought and the women characters in her six novels. Comparisons are made with the position of women today regarding marriage, work, and the goals of the women's liberation movement. Jane Austen shared with feminists a recognition of the need for self-fulfillment. Because she was a realist, she provided fulfillment for her heroines through the only vehicle that was available to most women of her time--marriage. The solution she worked out for satisfying this need in her own life was to maintain her identity as single women, a member of a family and community, while writing under the protection of anonymity. This compromise was necessary at a time when women's opportunities for meaningful work were severely limited. Because of the nature of her genius, she was able to work within the confines of society, but she was acutely aware that most women were not so fortunate. The young women in her novels ask repeatedly when men will learn to seek rational women companions rather than elegant females. The latter had been encouraged by men to subvert their intelligence, thereby weakening their integrity, a situation which Jane Austen deplored. Were she alive today, she would welcome the widening opportunities for women to develop as complete human beings.

INTRODUCTION

The position which Jane Austen holds as mistress of comedy, irony, delineator of character, and portraitist *extraordinaire* of the landed gentry in country villages at the end of the eighteenth century is secure in English literary history. Interest, both popular and critical, in her work has grown steadily since her death in 1817. The purpose of this study, however, is not to examine reasons for the growth of her reputation or to survey the wide range of topics of past and current interest to Austen scholars, but to present Jane Austen's attitude toward an issue of great interest in recent times: the position of women in society. This paper will attempt to answer some questions which women face today regarding their careers, marriages, and families in the context of Jane Austen's life and thought and the women characters in her six novels. Was she a precursor of the women's liberation movement? With which of its goals would she have been in sympathy or opposition? What was her attitude toward her own career as a woman writer? What values did she hold highest and to what standards did she conform? How do these values and standards compare with those espoused by the feminists today? Could she, indeed, have been called a feminist?

Jane Austen shared with feminists a recognition of the need for self-fulfillment. Because she was a realist, she provided fulfillment for her heroines through the only vehicle that was available to most women of her time--marriage. The solution she worked out for satisfying this need in her own life was to maintain her identity as a single woman, a member of a family and community, while writing under the protection afforded by anonymity. This compromise was necessary at a time when women's opportunities for meaningful work were severely limited. Because of the nature of her genius she was able to work within the confines of society, but she was acutely aware that most women were not so fortunate. The young women in her novels ask repeatedly when men will learn to seek rational women companions instead of elegant females. The latter had been encouraged by men to subvert their intelligence, thereby weakening their integrity, a situation which Jane Austen deplored. Were she alive today, she would welcome the widening opportunities for women to develop as complete human beings.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY INFLUENCES

Jane Austen was essentially a child of the eighteenth century. Born in 1775, she was an adult at the beginning of the new century, and lived only until 1817. By 1800 she had completed the first three of her six novels; the remaining three were written during the last seven years of her life, following a ten year period of relative inactivity. The influences that were brought to bear on her childhood were almost exclusively those of family and home; as she grew older, however, opportunities arose that expanded the limits of society beyond the family circle and the immediate neighborhood. Her childhood was spent at Steventon in Hampshire, where her father, George Austen, was rector.[1] Her forebears on both her father's and mother's sides were members of the middle class of gentry--that segment of society of which she writes with such intimate knowledge and perception. George Austen, who was orphaned early, had the good fortune to be sent to Oxford by an uncle; later he became a Fellow of St. John's College, took orders, and accepted the living at Steventon

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[1]Robert W. Chapman, Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 20. All subsequent biographical data is from this source unless otherwise indicated.

in Hants, which was in the gift of a relative in Kent. The Kent branch of the Austen family, the Knights of Godmersham, was far more prosperous than George Austen whose father had been a surgeon, an occupation (not considered a profession) of low rank in the eighteenth century. This kinship proved of vital importance later in establishing the direction of Jane Austen's life.[2]

Her mother, Cassandra Leigh, was descended from the Leighs of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire whose family was ennobled and connected through marriage with the Duke of Chandos. Cassandra's uncle, Theophilous Leigh, was Master of Balliol, while her father, Thomas Leigh, was a Fellow of All Souls.

It was thus into a family of university educated men with well established connections on both sides that Jane Austen was born, the seventh of eight children and the second daughter of George and Cassandra Austen.

Because the family of George Austen was a large one in which all the siblings maintained close ties with one another into maturity, it is necessary to examine it with some care. The family was the intimate milieu in which Jane Austen lived her entire life; within it her character and tastes were formed. The family influence was greater than it would be today because a single woman in her social class was completely dependent upon her father and brothers until she married. It was inconceivable that she would

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[2]Ibid., p. 4.

leave home because there was no way for a gentlewoman to support herself unless forced by necessity to enter service as a governess or companion. Fortunately, this was never required of the Austen daughters, but it was a fate of which Jane Austen was well aware and mentions with revulsion in Emma and in her letters.

Although there is no infalliable method to predict where genius will appear, there can be no question that some environments are more propitious for its development than others. Jane Austen was fortunate that hers was nurtured in an atmosphere at once sympathetic and stimulating. All the Austens were intelligent and lively. The authors of the Life, while acknowledging the possibility of "filial exaggeration" in the following appraisal of George Austen by one of his sons--"He was not only a profound scholar, but possessed of a most exquisite taste in every species of literature,"[3]--grant that Mr. Austen was more intellectual than most of the country clergy of his time. Later critics have concluded that Mr. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice bears a resemblance to Mr. Austen in his habit of taking refuge from the family scene behind the library doors. However, the authors of the Life

> surmise that Jane Austen inherited from her father her serenity of mind, the refinement of her intellect, and her delicate appreciation of style, while her mother supplied the

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[3]William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 23.

> acute observation of character and the wit and humor for which she was equally distinguished.[4]

While in comfortable economic circumstances (in 1800 George Austen's income was £600 a year after paying his two curates), the Austen family increased with the birth of a child every two years until Charles' birth in 1779, so that Mr. Austen sought to augment his income by educating young boys at his home, along with his own sons.

Two of Jane Austen's older brothers, James and Henry, matriculated at Oxford following the completion of their studies under their father, and later both took orders. The eldest, James (1765-1819), nearly eleven years Jane's senior, serious and scholarly, has been credited by his son, James Edward, (author of the Memoir), with influencing her taste in literature. Edward (1768-1852) made no pretense of scholarship and was, happily, adopted by the Thomas Knights of the Kent branch of the Austens, sent on the Grand Tour to complete his education, and later succeeded to the Knight estate, Godmersham. The two younger Austen sons, Francis and Charles, became sailors and eventually rose to the rank of admiral.

Of the five brothers, Henry (1771-1850) was Jane's favorite as Edward (1768-1852) was Cassandra's. Henry had vivacity, charm, and sparkling wit which delighted his sister, but he was not successful in business, bringing financial loss to his brothers as well as to himself. However,

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[4]Ibid., p. 16.

he handled the arrangements respecting the publication of Jane Austen's novels. It is to him that we owe the "Biographical Notice" of his sister which was included in the first edition of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion printed posthumously in 1817. This specimen of his writing fails to indicate Henry's wit, for the style is heavy; that Jane Austen found him amusing is, however, sufficient evidence that he was.

It was to her sister, Cassandra, nearly three years older than she, that Jane showed the strongest devotion. Perhaps it was the younger girl's admiration for the older that was originally responsible for Jane's attitude that in all respects Cassandra was her superior, and it was a point of view that did not change. When she was at "the maturity of her powers, and in the enjoyment of increasing success,"[5] Jane Austen told her niece, Caroline,[6] that Cassandra was "wiser and better than herself."[7] Following their father's death in 1805, Jane and Cassandra kept house for their mother and cared for her through her frequent illnesses, but Jane Austen's closest relationship remained with Cassandra. It was to her that she confided her deepest concerns and to whom she wrote every day that they were separated.

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[5]Ibid., quoting from James Austen-Leigh, Memoirs of Jane Austen (London: Richard Bentley, 1871), pp. 15-17.

[6]Elizabeth Jenkins, Jane Austen (New York" Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949), p. 363.

[7]W. Austen-Leigh, p. 51.

There is the temptation in any family as congenial as the Austens to become ingrown, or as the authors of the Memoir describe it, "exclusive," but Jane Austen was one of its most outgoing members.[8] In any event, it was not necessary to rely entirely on their own circle, for the rector's family had many contacts outside their immediate neighborhood. Though her older brothers had left home before Jane was grown, there were other boys living with the family as students, and when the brothers returned, they brought the ideas and outlook of the university. Visits to Edward at Godmersham enlarged the scope of Jane's familiar world by introducing her to the manners and style of the upper class of landed gentry. There were trips to Bath and London, and the visits to Steventon of George Austen's niece, Eliza de Feudille, daughter of his sister, Philadelphia Hancock. Eliza had been born in India, educated in France, and there married the Comte de Feudille who was guillotined in 1794. She must, therefore, have brought many foreign ideas and tastes to Hampshire. Eliza joined in the family theatricals, for which she had a flair and which her cousin, Jane, watched even if too young to participate.[9] It is to Eliza that we are indebted for this charming observation of the Austens of whom she was very fond: " [They were] all in high spirits and disposed to be pleased with each other."[10]

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[8]Ibid., p. 51.

[9]Ibid., p. 66.

[10]Ibid., p. 59.

The rectory where Jane spent the first twenty-five years of her life is no longer standing, but it was sketched by James' daughter, Anna, who lived there for a period as a child. Its arrangement is significant for its bearing on Jane's writing. The house must have been perpetually crowded with not only the Austens, but their servants, the boarding pupils, and guests. (Eliza wrote that she could only come during holidays when the students were gone.)[11] The second floor contained two bedrooms, one for Mr. and Mrs. Austen and one for Cassandra and Jane, and a dressing room which the girls used. It is this latter room which deserves notice, for it was here that Jane could retire to write in peace uninterrupted by the noise inevitable in a household composed largely of young boys. That Cassandra also shared the room was no deterrent for Jane because she was as comfortable with her as she would have been alone. Cassandra knew of the writing, in fact, Jane read her works both in progress and in the finished form to the family in the evenings. It was Virginia Woolf, writing over a century later, who penned an eloquent plea for the aspiring woman writer to have "a room of one's own"; this, plus a fixed income of sufficient amount to live on, were the two requisites which she found basic for a woman's successful development as an artist.[12] It was the first of

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[11]Ibid., p. 74.

[12]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929, 1957), p. 4.

these that Jane Austen enjoyed during the formative period of her life and the brief period of her first mature productivity. Who can say how much this felicitious circumstance--merely the arrangement of rooms which gave privacy to the young author--contributed toward her writing?

The Austens broke up their home at Steventon in 1801. Thereafter, they lived in rented rooms in Bath and Southampton until 1809 when Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, and Jane settled at Chawton. Jane Austen's writing suffered during this disruptive period--there were many factors contributing to her dissatisfaction and unhappiness in these years; it cannot have been merely coincidence that as soon as she moved into what was to be her home for the remainder of her life, she returned to writing in the full vigor and confidence of her powers. A sense of security derived from living in her own home and following a congenial routine was apparently necessary to Jane Austen's artistic temperament. She found such an atmosphere at Chawton Cottage, the home Edward provided for his mother and sisters, and it proved conducive, indeed, to her absorption in her writing. Even here though, all was not ideal for there was no dressing room, no "room of one's own"; Jane's writing table was in the family sitting room on the ground floor. The only provision for privacy came from the door which squeaked, thereby providing an alarm that warned of incoming visitors at whose approach Jane Austen hastily covered her small sheets of manuscript with blotting paper.

Mary Lascelles has remarked on her exceptional ability to shift back and forth from the world of illusion to that of reality.[13] For one less gifted, such interruptions would have either slowed the creative process or stopped it altogether. Such frustrations would have been inimical, to say the least, but they were not for Jane Austen. It was her wish to keep her authorship unknown from all but the immediate family (her nephew, James Edward Leigh, while at Winchester School, read both Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice before knowing who wrote them)[14] that led her into such difficulties. If, however, the price of privacy was high, it was one she was willing to pay.

Since a child absorbs the values of his home, it follows that Jane Austen's tastes in literature must have been formed by the books that she heard her father read aloud in the evening as well as those she read from his library. It has been noted that the Austen sons were educated at home by their father--as an economy measure, no doubt--before going on to the university or to sea, but Cassandra and Jane were sent away to school at a very early age. This move may have been prompted by practical considerations also, in order to make room for paying students. From Mrs. Austen we learn that Jane was sent to school, not from any educational benefits that her parents thought she

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[13]Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 12.

[14]Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, Personal Aspects of Jane Austen (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920), p. 12.

might receive at the age of seven, but because she could not bear to be parted from Cassandra who was going for the instruction: "If Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate."[15] The girls attended two schools from the first of which, Mrs. Crawley's, they were removed when Jane became seriously ill of "putrid fever" (diptheria) which broke out in the school. The following year (1784) the girls were sent to Reading to Mrs. Latournelle's school where they stayed less than a year. The second school, an easy-going establishment, may have been the model for the school which Jane Austen described as Mrs. Goddard's in Emma:

> ...an old fashioned boarding school...where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.[16]

The tone is one of admiring approval set as it is in antithesis to the

> seminary, or an establishment, or anything which professed, in refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality upon new principles and new systems ---and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity.[17]

The Austens were not as well off as the Bennets in Pride and Prejudice, so were not able to provide tutors or

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[15] W. Austen-Leigh, p. 25.

[16] Jane Austen, The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932, 1971). Vol. 4, Emma, p. 22. All subsequent references to the novels of Jane Austen are to this edition.

[17] Ibid.

masters for Cassandra and Jane such as Elizabeth Bennet described as being available to her and her sisters, but Mr. Austen was an able teacher, their cousin, Eliza, must have taught them French, and we have been told that James helped Jane in her choice of reading and in polishing her writing style.[18] The latter assertion may be questioned as he was known to be pompous and serious in later life, causing Jane Austen to find him tiresome; thus it seems unlikely that her "bright and sparkling" style was in any way attributable to James' influence. Mrs. Austen undoubtedly helped her daughters as much as possible, but she had many household responsibilities: looking after the servants, managing the poultry and vegetable garden--for the rectory was both self-sustaining farm and home--providing the linens, and other multiple duties devolving upon the wife of the rector and the mother of a large family. Her daughter may have had her in mind when she voiced sympathy for Catherine Morland's mother in Northanger Abbey.

> Mrs. Morland was a very good woman, and wished to see her children everything they ought to be; but her time was so much occupied by lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves.[19]

It requires some mental adjustment for twentieth century women to empathize with the educational practices of nearly two hundred years ago, but they were practices which continued into the present century among the English upper

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[18] W. Austen-Leigh, p. 46.

[19] Vol. 1, p. 15.

classes. Girls seldom went to school and if they did, it was to an establishment similar to Mrs. Goddard's or Mrs. Latournelle's, where they were expected to learn only the ladylike accomplishments of singing, playing the piano, drawing, and needlework in addition to the rudiments of reading, penmanship and ciphering. No attempt was made to learn the classics, although French might be included in the curriculum. Even Jane Austen's father, who instructed his sons in the classics, saw no reason to teach them to his daughters, who were certainly capable of learning. That they would have had no use for such erudition, since they would not attend the university, is obvious; it was also inconceivable that their duties would ever be other than domestic. Such was the rationale behind limiting the range of women's education, but it may have been frustrating to a young girl of such intelligence as Jane Austen. Miss Lascelles noted that her men and women "do not feel the impact of ideas" and explains that by citing Jane Austen's lack of classical education and the fact that members of her class did not cope with abstractions.[20] In the famous correspondence between Jane Austen and the Prince Regent's Librarian, the Reverend Mr. J. S. Clarke (1815), she alludes to the incompleteness of her education:

> A classical education, or at any rate, a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient or modern, appears to me quite indispensable [for the serious writer] ...and I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female

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[20]pp. 132-33.

who ever dared to be an authoress.[21]

Of course, this must not be taken literally for she was neither "unlearned" nor "uninformed," but she was trying to reject tactfully Mr. Clarke's suggestions for her future writing. He had asked her "To delineate...the habits of life and character...of an English clergyman."[22] Because he was obtuse she had to resort to exaggeration, but still he was not convinced. He tried again: "Any historical romance, illustrative of the history of the august House of Cobourg, would just now be very interesting."[23] To this she responded with this explanation of her inability to accede to his request:

> I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or at other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.[24]

Here we see Jane Austen's recognition of her particular gifts. Perhaps the comic writer never felt the lack of classical training as did another woman writer of the next generation, George Eliot, who spent years of study in an effort to compensate for deficiencies in her classical background. The attitudes of these two women of genius in

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[21]W. Austen-Leigh, Life, Letter, December 1815, pp. 319-20.

[22]Ibid., Letter, November 1815, pp. 312-13.

[23]Ibid., Letter, March 1816, pp. 322-23.

[24]Ibid., Letter, April 1816, pp. 323-24.

their approaches to their work provide an interesting contrast which accounts for their views on their education. Jane Austen took her work seriously--she was no dilettante --and its underlying themes, which deal with universal problems of human relationships, are basically serious; but her approach is comic, for while tragedy may threaten, the conclusions of her novels are always happy. It is her comic-ironic-satiric spirit that accounts for both her fame and popularity. Conversely George Eliot, while she depicts marvellously humorous scenes, is, and considers herself, basically a serious writer. She is never satiric[25] and it is this over-seriousness which she allows to become heavy and ponderous that turns both readers and critics against her while accepting what she advocates. She has been accused of being a "blue-stocking,"[26] an appellation that would have been offensive to Jane Austen, for while she was highly intelligent, her genius was of an altogether different order from George Eliot's.[27]

Perhaps it was this kind of ponderous intellectuality that a later English woman writer, Beatrix Potter (born 1866), had in mind which made her observe:

> Thank goodness, my education was neglected;
> I was never sent to school--it would have

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[25]Virginia Woolf, The Common Reader (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925), p. 236.

[26]Ibid., p. 232.

[27]Frank Bradbrook, Jane Austen and Her Predecessors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 169.

> rubbed off some of the originality (if I had not died of shyness or been killed with over pressure). I fancy I could have been taught anything if I had been caught young; but it was in the days when parents kept governesses and only boys went to school in most families.[28]

These might easily have been Jane Austen's sentiments as well, for she was shy as a child as she reveals in a letter to Cassandra contrasting her own early behavior to that of a child who was calling on her:

> What has become of all the shyness in the world? [This child has] all the ready curiosity one sees in the best children of the present day; so unlike anything that I was myself at the same age, that I am all astonishment and shame.[29]

That she nearly died in her first school--not from "over pressure," but from illness--has been noted. Although there is no reason to think that conditions at Mrs. Crawley's school at Southampton were comparable to those at Lowood School which it was young Jane Eyre's fate (and her creator's, Charlotte Bronte's) to attend, we may be grateful that Jane Austen did not run the risk to her health or imagination that longer school years might have affected. After all, she did not suffer the neglect that Mary Wollstonecraft, her contemporary, experienced from a dissolute father who, though the heir to a sizable fortune, failed to provide adequate education for his daughter.

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[28]Margaret Lane, The Tale of Beatrix Potter (London: Frederick Warne, 1946, 1964), p. 32. It is interesting that Lord John Bradbourne, who directed the film ballet of Beatrix Potter's books in 1970, is a descendant of the Lord Brabourne, Jane Austen's great-nephew, who edited the Letters in 1884.

[29]Jenkins, Jane Austen, p. 30.

Nor did she consider formal education necessary for her heroines, for only Anne Elliot (in Persuasion) attended school at all. The others were educated at home by their mothers, governesses, or left to themselves. Mrs. Dashwood (in Sense and Sensibility) repeatedly asserted her plan to "improve" her thirteen-year-old daughter, Margaret, with "our books and our music,"[30] but the likelihood of her carrying out her project was as remote as Emma's to read the books which she was fond of listing. Mrs. Bennet made no pretense of interest in any subject that did not lead ultimately to marriage for her daughters, so Lydia at fifteen was free to husband-hunt.

Jane Austen's situation was similar to Elizabeth Bennet's--"Such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means--we were always encouraged to read"[31]--or to "scramble [herself] into a little education," but the rest of the quotation cannot be applied to her--"without coming back prodigies"[32]--for Jane Austen was a prodigy even though neither she nor her family would have agreed to such a description. Perhaps it is the connotation of the term that is offensive--that of the self-important pseudo-intellectual whom Jane Austen caricatured in Mary Bennet--but posterity sees Jane Austen at a distance and its opinion

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[30]Vol. 1, p. 55.

[31]Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, p. 356.

[32]Vol. 4, Emma, p. 22.

of this young girl is that she was a prodigy, indeed. The family's assessment of her is modest:

> For the most part her culture must have been self-culture....On the whole, she grew up with a good stock of such accomplishments as might be expected of a girl bred in one of the more intellectual of the clerical houses of the day. She read French easily, and knew a little Italian; and she was well read in the English literature of the eighteenth century.[33]

It is this latter influence that permanently affected her outlook on life, her writing, and her career. The degree to which Jane Austen can be considered an eighteenth century writer is open to question; no critic, however, disputes that she herself was well-read in the period that immediately preceded her. As a young girl, she was allowed to read freely from her father's library, a privilege that probably would have been denied her had she been born fifty years later when Victorian standards of prudery would have limited her reading. It is in this respect that B. C. Southam refers to Jane Austen

> ...as a child of the eighteenth century. If anyone is surprised or even shocked that a young girl was ready to joke about deformity, injury, death, drunkeness, childbearing, and illegitimacy [in the juvenilia], it should be remembered that much of this vigorous humor derives from traditions of fiction and stage comedy with which the Steventon household was familiar.[34]

These remarkable youthful effusions were toned down in the mature writings, but these plays and parodies of the excesses of sentimental fiction and drama indicate what

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[33] W. Austen-Leigh, p. 29.

[34] Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 24.

Jane Austen was reading as well as the course which she was to follow.

Her father's library contained five hundred volumes of what her brother, Henry, described as "history and belles lettres,...the best essays and novels."[35] She personally owned Goldsmith's History of England, Dodsley's Collection of Poems, Fanny Burney's Camilla, Hume's History, Thomson's Works, and Hayle's Poems, all of which are dated prior to 1800. Dr. Chapman notes "Her possession of such books gives us a light on the attitude of her elders to her precocious ambitions."[36]

That her reading was not limited to these volumes we know from the literary allusions in her letters and novels. The influence of her early reading has been the subject of intense research by modern scholars of whom Frank Bradbrook has done the most detailed study. He distinguishes the literary sources that influenced Jane Austen during her lifetime: "Though the bases of Jane Austen's art were Augustan and eighteenth century, she was not completely out of sympathy with the new romanticism."[37] Andrew Wright questions both H. W. Garrod and David Cecil in their assessments of Jane Austen's position: Garrod's, that she reflects the "humdrum ideals" of the mid-eighteenth cen-

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[35]Henry Austen, "Biographical Notice of the Author," in Vol. 5, Northanger Abbey, p. 7.

[36]Facts and Problems, p. 30.

[37]p. 78.

tury, and Cecil's that she is its "last exquisite blossom." He remarks that they fail to recognize the many allusions she makes to the Romantic writers,[38] concluding "In any event, her world was not--it could not be--that of Squire Allworthy and Uncle Toby."[39]

This observation is worth noting because the generalization is often made without qualification that Jane Austen is an eighteenth-century writer. A recent critic, Lloyd Brown, writing in support of this position, contends that Jane Austen integrates her style with the "philosophical traditions" of the earlier period. In doing this, she continues the tradition on two levels--that of "behavioral reality," that is in depicting her characters acting realistically--and adhering to "moral realism," their ethical judgments are consistent with the code established by Dr. Samuel Johnson[40] (whom Jane Austen referred to as her "dear Dr. Johnson"). On the question of the degree of Johnson's influence, Miss Lascelles comments:

> If Jane Austen trained herself in Johnson's school, that was not, I think, the limit of her debt of him; something more personal remains--some tones of his voice seem to be echoed in her style... her antithetic phrasing.[41]

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[38]Andrew H. Wright, Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 15.

[39]Ibid., p. 14.

[40]Lloyd Brown, Bits of Ivory: Narrative Technique in Jane Austen's Fiction (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 12.

[41]p. 109.

Also implicit in Jane Austen's novels is the acceptance of society built on class structure, an idea that modern readers find difficult to accept, but which was questioned only by radicals at the end of the eighteenth century. Chapman finds this further evidence of Johnson's influence, for he supported this theory which he called subordination.[42]

Jane Austen writes frequently about her enthusiasm for novel reading--a habit which she defends with spirit in Northanger Abbey.[43] According to Chapman, Jane Austen had read Tom Jones before she was thirty and she mentions Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey in her letters.[44] Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison was a particular favorite and she knew the works of other novelists, Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, and Ann Radcliffe. But there is no record that she ever read another work by the latter, The Female Advocate or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation (1799), which is regrettable for her reaction would have been of interest.

Jane Austen was as familiar with Shakespeare as was Henry Crawford (in Mansfield Park) and undoubtedly learned about him in the same way: "Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an

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[42] p. 192.

[43] Vol. 5, pp. 38-39.

[44] p. 38.

Englishman's constitution."[45] She also knew Milton and the other standard poets--Pope, Gray, Cowper, and Crabbe. Jane Austen's debt to Fielding is widely acknowledged. Bradbrook recognizes the resemblance between Fielding and Jane Austen in their use of ironical tone and satirical manner. It was not a case of the latter writer simply adopting the former's tone, for she made it her own by refining it to suit both her more fastidious tastes and those of her times. Vestiges of the vulgarity found in Fielding's characters remain in Mrs. Jennings, Admiral Croft, and John Thorpe, but the author's point of view is different. Fielding, the epitome of masculinity according to Bradbrook, always presents the simple approach of the "predatory, sexually excited male... uninterested in complications of the human heart."[46] While he is more intelligent than Richardson, he is less sensitive. Jane Austen, observing the scene from the feminine perspective, shares with Fielding an awareness of social differences and dramatic situations of a satirical nature.[47]

It was, however, to the female writers, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith, and Ann Radcliffe, that Jane Austen turned for direction in matters of technique, women who had not succeeded in adapting the methods of Fielding and Richardson to their purposes. Their strength lay in their close

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[45]Vol. 3, Mansfield Park, p. 338.

[46]p. 89.

[47]Ibid.

contact with life and its common experiences.[48] Bradbrook finds this element comprises Jane Austen's "Criticism of life" and it is a distinctly feminine attribute.[49] She, of course, surpassed her models as do all creative geniuses; like Shakespeare, she was able to take from her predecessors what was useful to her and pass it on to the next generation fired by the imprint of her mind.

In her works may be discerned the emphasis on reason, detachment, and skepticism of the age of Johnson, while her concern with moral issues foreshadowed the primary focus of the Victorians who followed her.[50]

Edith Wharton analyzes Jane Austen's position in the literary continuum:

> Jane Austen's delicate genius flourished on the very edge of a tidal wave of prudery. Already Scott was averting his eyes from the facts on which the maiden novelist in her rectory parlour looked unperturbed.[51]

(To describe Jane Austen's genius as "delicate" is misleading, though she is delicate compared to Fielding or Richardson in the absence of overt interest in sex in her novels, but she considered this a matter of taste. Walter Allen suggests a more comprehensive picture of Jane Austen's genius when he describes "her tough eighteenth century mind" which draws strength from "her severity of

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[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid., p. 138.

[50]Ibid., p. 137.

[51]The Writing of Fiction (London: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1925), pp. 22-23.

values.")[52]

The breadth of view perceived from that rectory was for many years assumed to be narrow. G.K. Chesterton may have been responsible for enforcing that opinion in his preface to Love and Friendship [sic] in 1913, but it has been shown false. It is a hard "myth," as Robert Liddell calls it,[53] to kill, though every Austen student since Chesterton has refuted it. As early as 1920, Jane Austen's descendant, Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, stated the purpose of her book, Personal Aspects of Jane Austen, was to "refute the impression that Jane Austen lived life in isolated circumstances."[54] It has been shown that the rectory, far from being confining, presented the young writer with ample material. In later years she had the advantage of being situated in Chawton which was only fifty miles (a day's journey) from London;[55] and the cottage was located on the Winchester Road, making it easily accessible. In this period of her greatest productivity (1809-1817), Jane Austen's horizons expanded through her contact with publishers and her connection with James S. Clarke. Chapman concluded that though she had no desire for fame, she would have been forced into submitting to it had her health remained.[56]

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[52]Walter Allen, The English Novel: A Short Critical History (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1954), p. 125.

[53]Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1963), p. xi.

[54]p. 3. [55]Chapman, p. 70. [56]Ibid., p. 135.

Thus it may be seen that the influences that formed Jane Austen's taste and directed her genius were principally those inherent in her family situation--its social status as a well established and connected family of the gentry, unusually well educated, with contacts among the influential people of the time. The close family unit gave its youngest daughter a sense of identity and security to which she responsed with her devotion. Her precocious reading habits were recognized and encouraged. At an early age, her taste was formed by the eighteenth-century masters of English prose. The essence of their thought--respect for reason and correctness and the "sense of permanent social and moral standards"--was thereby implanted in her.[57] While these were the standards of Johnson, Jane Austen was entertained by the sentimental and Gothic novels as well, and delighted in parodying their shortcomings.

Bradbrook sums up the relation between literary and family concerns: "In her works as in her own life, personal relationships came first. Books and reading were of surpeme importance, but they were a means to an end, the civilized life. They were never allowed to become a substitute for life itself."[58] These remarks echo Chapman's: "However writing might absorb her, the family was her first and, I think, dearest concern."[59]

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[57] Lionel Stevenson, The English Novel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 18.

[58] p. 138

[59] p. 1.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ENGLISH GENTLEWOMAN--1800

Jane Austen has been criticized for the limitations of her range which she herself described as "the little" bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush."[1] She does, indeed, limit herself to one segment of society, the landed gentry, of which she was a member. Since these were the people whom she knew best, it seems strange that she is criticized for writing about them. That she deliberately chooses to concentrate on "three or four families in a country village"[2] in no way limits the degree of her understanding; rather it allows her to focus in depth on her characters. Elizabeth Bowen remarks, "But what she at once depicted and penetrated was not just a world, it was the world.... Her view of life, in fact, if confined to, was not confined by, drawing rooms and lawns."[3] Another critic, R. Brimley Johnson, sees Jane Austen as consciously setting out to demonstrate "how much she can do without," for instance, any suggestion of mystery, crime,

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[1]W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, December 1816, p. 378.

[2]Ibid., Letter, September 1814, p. 357.

[3]English Novelists (London: William Collins, 1945), pp. 24-25.

melodrama, or the excitement of high adventure.[4] Within her chosen range, what is revealed about her characters is universally true of human nature. Her fictional world is the world in microcosm. It is this universality that makes Jane Austen's novels great art and her women, particularly, living individuals. "What is valuable about a work of art," Arnold Kettle declares, "is the depth and truth of the experience it communicates and such qualities cannot be identified with the breadth of the panorama...She Jane Austen wrote about what she understood and no artist can do more."[5]

There was little mixing of the gentry and the aristocracy in England at the turn of the eighteenth century, one reason being their conflicting political interests: the aristocracy was allied with the Whigs, and the gentry with the Tories.[6] Jane Austen's own experience with the aristocracy was limited to her visit to Stoneleigh, the home of the Leighs, her mother's relatives. There she observed life led on a grander scale than that with which she was familiar at Steventon or at Edward's home, Godmersham, in Kent. But she never felt confident enough to use this knowledge of the upper class in her writing. The presence

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[4]The Women Novelists (Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1919, 1967), p. 83.

[5]"Emma," Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 118.

[6]Chapman, pp. 25-26

of its members is felt, particularly in Emma, regardless of the fact that they are never seen. The activities of the Churchills of Enscombe, the Sucklings of Maple Grove, and Dixons of Balycraig are of the utmost interest to the inhabitants of Highbury and they try to emulate their standards. Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall (in Persuasion) and Lady Catherine de Bourgh (in Pride and Prejudice) are Jane Austen's only aristocratic characters and she satirized both their foolish class pride and personal vanity to the point of farce.

Nor does Jane Austen show any interest in those lower than herself in the social scale. Few servants are mentioned by name in the novels: Serle, Mr. Woodhouse's cook, who understands the boiling of an egg; James, the coachman, an object of Mr. Woodhouse's solicitude; and Patty, the Bates' maid-of-all-work, come to mind. But Emma's personal maid is not named, nor are the nursemaids whom Mrs. John Knightly brought from London to look after her four children when she visited her father at Hartfield; perhaps even more surprising to the modern reader, their number is not even designated. The presence of servants is assumed, but Jane Austen never considers them as individuals whose activities are vital to the plot.

Moreover, she shows little concern for the poor in her novels, although they are set at a time of increasing hardship for the lower classes. The landed classes had grown increasingly wealthy during the eighteenth century because

of improved farming methods, but agricultural laborers did not benefit from the landowner's prosperity. Steventon must have had its share of desperately poor rural people whom Jane Austen undoubtedly visited in much the same way that Emma and Harriet Smith visited the poor in Highbury. In a time of laissez-faire economic policy, the poor had no recourse from want but that of the charity of the lady-bountiful type practised by Emma. No doubt Jane Austen fulfilled her charitable obligations, but the larger questions arising from her apparent acceptance of the social philosophy that the many poor should work to support the few rich in ease and comfort is never expounded. To expect this of her would be expecting too much, perhaps, for Jane Austen was not a sociologist but an artist interested in depicting fallible human beings as they struggle toward understanding and accepting the truth of reality. One critic who has examined Jane Austen's social consciousness, Arnold Kettle, finds comfort in the scene mentioned above in Emma, for he believes that here Jane Austen indicates that she questions the structure of the society which she appears elsewhere to accept.[6]

The fact that Jane Austen limits herself to the world of the gentry may result from deliberate choice, but that choice was influenced by her own position. Graham Hough defined the gentry during the period of Jane Austen's lifetime as encompassing those owners of large estates such as

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[6]"Emma," p. 122.

Darcy, small landowners--Mr. Bennet (in Pride and Prejudice) --members of the four socially acceptable professions--the church, the law, the army and the navy, and all their dependents, such as the impecunious Miss Bates and her mother.[7] The financial backgrounds of those who fall within these limits vary from great wealth to genteel poverty, but rest ultimately on the old criteria of land ownership. At first reading, this class appears in the novels to be static, but it is not, for Jane Austen's life spanned a period of rapid economic change, principally seen in the increasing industrialization of the north, a fact of which she was aware: Bingley's father had made his money in the north in a manner unspecified and was not a landowner. Also, Mrs. Bennet's sister, Mrs. Gardiner, married a man "in trade," therefore, below her socially; however, both the Gardiners show such good sense and act on such firm moral principles that they earn the admiration and friendship of the aristocratic Darcy. It is on the basis of similar analyses that D. J. Greene finds the rise of the middle class to be the unifying theme of all of Jane Austen's novels, most pronounced, however, in Pride and Prejudice.[8] This may be a minor theme, but it is certainly not the major theme. To say so is to present a one-sided

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[7]"Narrative and Dialogue on Jane Austen," Critical Quarterly 12 (Autumn 1970), p. 223.

[8]"Jane Austen and the Peerage," Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 162.

view, one which distorts both Jane Austen's purpose--which is primarily to entertain--and her tone--which is that of comic irony. She was no more an economist than a sociologist (though it might be said that her gift of insight into the human mind qualified her a psychologist).

It must be remembered that although Jane Austen is essentially a realist, she is also an artist who uses her material to further her ends--the realistic portrayal of characters as they face universal problems and make fundamental choices. Even though she is writing comedy, decisions must be made on a basis of rational judgment; therefore, it follows that the world in which her characters move must be rational. While she makes the facts of her world correspond to those of the real world, she imposes a pattern of events that is never encountered in reality.[9] Her approach differs from that of "other satirists of the world of illusion," according to Miss Lascelles, "in maintaining that to her the actual world appears the prettier and pleasanter place."[10] Each of her heroines (with the exception of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park) is assured of a happy future only after she has discarded illusion and chosen reality. That Jane Austen was amused by the unattractive people of her acquaintance as well as by the foolish characters of her creation [illegible]stifies to her tolerance and objectivity, qualities which derive from her con-

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[9]Vol. 2, pp. 172-73.

[10]Ibid., p. 71.

fident security.[11] Her lack of malice is also indicative of her determination to find as much pleasure in this world as possible, whether through observation of rational or irrational behavior--though she never confused the two.

Because she saw this world as the better place, one must not infer that Jane Austen was unaware of the social and political upheavals of her day. The husband of her cousin Eliza de la Feuillide, the Comte de Feuillide, was guillotined in Paris in 1794, and the young son of Warren Hastings lived with the Austen for a time, but her outlook was affected by her social class as well as by her personality and family circle. The gentry were less interested in change than members of the lower class who aspired to move upwards. Nor were they motivated to advance in order to satisfy a desire for luxury similar to the aristocrats'. In Jane Austen's world, David Cecil observes that women were "forbidden by convention from moving in any society except that in which they were born; and the class she was born in...was the one most enslaved to convention. But," he adds, "she kept to it."[12] The reason for this may lie in the position in the social hierarchy of the woman's world, which Hough describes as "a sub-variety of the outlook of the gentry as a whole."[13] Women had no contact

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[11]Stevenson, p. 186.

[12]Jane Austen (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), p. 13.

[13]p. 223.

with the world of work, being neither employers nor employees; therefore, their view of society was restricted and they tended to see only their class, mistaking it for the whole. The seemingly--from a man's point of view--trivial activities of their daily round were of vital concern to women because it was these occupations that comprised the substance of their lives to an extent unknown today.

At the end of the eighteenth century, English gentlewomen had little control over their lives, largely because they had no control over their money. As Virginia Woolf wrote so eloquently in 1929:

> "It is only for the last forty-eight years that Mrs. Seton has had a penny of her own. For all the centuries before that it would have been her husband's property....Every penny that I earn, she would have said will be taken from me and disposed according to my husband's wisdom...so that to earn money, even if I could earn money, is not a matter that interests me very greatly."[14]

Upon her husband's death his property usually went to the eldest son, who was then expected to provide an annuity for his mother.[15] Thus during her entire life a woman was completely dependent on men for support, her father, husband and son. In Jane Austen's family, it was the third son, Edward Knight, who provided principally for his mother and and sisters, following Mr. Austen's death, because he had inherited the estate of his adoptive father and was thus richer than his elder brother, James.

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[14] A Room, p. 21.

[15] "Marriage, Property and Romance in Jane Austen's Novels," The Hibbert Journal 65 (Summer, 1967), p. 156.

An entail was often arranged that was in effect for three generations, thereby ensuring direct inheritance. Such was the situation in the Bennet family, much deplored by Mrs. Bennet. However, the entail could be changed so that women could receive it--as had been done in the case of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter--but it was not common practice.[16]

The only important area where women had any choice--and here the English woman had freedom unknown to her European counterpart--was in the choice of husband, since marriages were no longer arranged in eighteenth-century England.[17] There was no more important choice which a young woman would make than choosing the man she would marry. The difference between the woman's position in 1800 and today is that this decision was quite literally the only major decision that she would ever make freely. Choice of career was not a consideration, nor could she choose to divorce her husband if the marriage proved unsuccessful. Marriage was a woman's only social and economic defense against the exigencies of a world so totally male dominated that the single woman had virtually no place in it, a fact of which Jane Austen's characters were well aware. Thus courtship was the most important period in a girl's life,

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[16]Ibid., pp. 153-54.

[17]E. Rubenstein, "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations of of "Pride and Prejudice" (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 8.

the time when she was free to exercise her own judgment in choosing a mate.

If she erred in judgment and accepted a man who later treated her badly, she had no legal recourse for release from the marriage. In 1735, Dorothy Gray, mother of the poet, Thomas Gray, appealed to the law, not for divorce, but for protection against the physical brutality that she had suffered from her husband--treatment that had included "...beating, kicking, punching, and with the most vile and abrasive language, that she hath been in the utmost fear of her life..." over the thirty years of their marriage.[18] During this time, she had supported herself and her son by keeping a small millinery shop. Her appeal, however, was unsuccessful, for the law would not step between husband and wife regardless of the "unhappy circumstance."[19]

Jane Austen, of course, dealt with a happier world where beatings did not occur ("Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can.")[20] but she was not romantic about marriage as her novels and letters attest. In the novels, happy marriages among the generations of the parents of the courting couples are the exceptions, the Crofts in Persuasion and the Gardiners in Pride and Prejudice being the only examples

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[18]Edmund Gosse, Thomas Gray: English Men of Letters Series, ed. John Morley (New York: Harper & Bros., n. d.), p. 9.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Vol. 3, Mansfield Park, p. 461.

that come to mind. The Bennets could hardly be considered models of marital bliss. Mr. Bennet serves rather to depict the folly of a man acting on impulse, who fails to recognize that happiness in marriage depends on more lasting attractions than a pretty face. Even in a situation which Jane Austen treats as comic, her moral firmness is evident. In her balanced scheme of values, the impulsive must pay for their indiscretions. Because Mr. Bennet, who was intelligent, and therefore should have known better, acted irrationally in choosing his wife, he is condemned to live as best he can with the inane Mrs. Bennet.

All of Jane Austen's novels end happily with the marriage of the heroine to the right man, a union that, unlike the Bennets', is based on mutual esteem as well as affection. It is to ensure this conclusion that all of the actions of these young girls, whether conscious or unconscious, are directed. Not only will their future social and economic status be determined by their marriages, but more importantly to Jane Austen, their emotional fulfillment. When the events that comprise the daily routine--the morning calls, walks, picnics, dinners, and dances--are seen as elements of courtship leading to the ultimate goal of marriage, they acquire greater significance. It is on the minds and hearts of young English gentlewomen--from seventeen-year-old Catherine Morland to twenty-seven-year-old Anne Elliot--during the brief period of courtship which was "a moment of unique adventure, the one time in her life

when her destiny lay not in her family's hands, or her husband's, but to a significant degree in her own,"[21] that Jane Austen concentrates her penetrating eye.

Although the young woman's attention is directed toward the eligible young men, Jane Austen, ever the realist, never presents the man's point of view for she did not trust herself to picture it accurately. For the same reason she never shows a scene in which only men are present. Thus Jane Austen not only limits the social setting to one class, she also limits the point of view to that of the female characters with occasional direct observations of her own. The men, whose characters are not completely developed, conform more to the conventions of the eighteenth century hero as portrayed by Fanny Burney[22] than do the women, who are drawn with such individuality that they appear to continue their lives outside the confines of the books. It is this ability to infuse the life-giving force into her women that makes Jane Austen the great artist that she is.

Fanny Burney introduced the domestic novel to eighteenth century readers, but her women accept men's superiority without question and act according to the way they think men want them to.[23] Though Jane Austen also uses the

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[21] Rubenstein, p. 8.

[22] Bradbrook, p. 96.

[23] Ibid., p. 110.

theme of female subordination, her women choose it as the means that will lead to their eventual fulfillment. The earlier women novelists, including Mrs. Inchbald and Miss Edgeworth, "exploited the drama of self-extinction" by exaggerating their heroines into sentimental martyrs, as Harrison Steeves observes.[24] David Daiches remarks on the change of emphasis in Jane Austen's works: "Jane Austen's world is a woman's world and the male characters are simply symbols of the fates in store for women."[25] Jane Austen was the first then to present the woman's world from the woman's point of view, and because she understands it and is able to withstand pressure to conform to men's standards, her characters have integrity. The women are seen in many roles all new in fiction, as friends of other women, members of families, and members of society. Previously women had only been seen by men in relation to other men as the pursued or the pursuer in love. "And how small a part of a woman's life that is; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts on his nose," Virginia Woolf expostulates.[26]

The restrictions within which Jane Austen chooses to

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[24] Before Jane Austen: The Shaping of the English Novel in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Holt, Rinehardt & Winston, 1965), p. 375.

[25] "Jane Austen, Karl Marx, the Aristocratic Dance," American Scholar 18 (Summer 1958): 291.

[26] A Room, pp. 86-87.

operate serve her purpose well, enabling her to focus intensely on her "three or four country families," thereby enlarging our understanding of the universal through understanding of the particular. It is evidence of her genius that her characters, while on one level, appear concerned with specific individual and trivial personal affairs, on the other they represent universal traits and desires. The world is seen in the village regardless of the fact that its inhabitants are bound by social conventions which no longer apply. These conventions were so well understood by Jane Austen's original readers that they were in a better position to understand the implications of their violations than twentieth-century readers. The present-day reader must be told that for a girl to dance twice with the same partner during one evening was an indication that she was considering him seriously as a marriage partner. Knowing this he may grasp the significance of, first, Isabella Thorpe's refusal in Northanger Abbey to dance twice with James Morland, and second, "The speed and willingness with which she immediately breaks these rules"[27] in changing her mind and accepting his invitation. The latter indicates two things about Isabella: that she wants to marry James and she is reckless and impetuous, qualities that mark her for future disgrace. In refusing to abide by the rules of social conduct, she puts herself in an unfavorable light

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[27]Yasmine Goonerante, Jane Austen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 10.

according to Jane Austen's standards, for one runs obvious risks in breaking conventions. As Cecil comments, "Only fools imagined they could live happily in the world without paying attention to what its inhabitants thought."[28] Another girl who defies convention--again a convention which must be explained to the modern reader--is Marianne Dashwood who corresponds with Willoughby to whom she is not yet officially engaged. This action on her part is tantamount to acknowledgement of their engagement, for at this time single uncommitted women did not correspond with men.[29] Marianne must pay for her failure to conform to social convention; Willoughby soon forsakes her, an action which is consistent with his previous lighthanded treatment of Marianne in openly addressing letters to her.

These examples of out-moded conventions are given to illustrate how reliance on them can become less effective in time. They play a small part in Jane Austen's writing and are far less significant than her emphasis on universal standards of behavior. Her concern was that her heroines should act according to moral precepts founded on timeless values. This is not to say that they do not make mistakes. Jane Austen's realism, humanity and impartiality extend to her favorites as well as to the less attractive characters; they are all compounded of both virtues and vices, the

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[28] p. 116.

[29] F. B. Pinion, A Jane Austen Companion (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), p. 50.

heroines being those who see their errors and discard their illusions. F. R. Leavis has said of Jane Austen, "Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist."[30] It is often remarked that it is in this aspect of her writing that Jane Austen most reflects the standards of the eighteenth-century moralists, particularly Samuel Johnson. Cecil says, "The issues between Marianne and Elinor are the issues between Rousseau and Dr. Johnson,"[31] but Miss Lascelles sees this conflict differently:

> I do not believe the vital issue between Elinor and Marianne--not between the wise and foolish virgins in any other of Jane Austen's novels--to be the issue between head and heart, old-fashioned rationalist and new-fashioned romanticist. I have tried to show it rather as (in part) an expression of the constant tranquil preference for a true over a false vision of life, particularly with regard to ideas of happiness.[32]

How, then, do these young women attain a "true vision" of life? It must be assumed that they do succeed in attaining it, for the conclusions of the novels show the heroines rewarded for their recognition of life's true values by seeing them embodied in the men they marry. They will then live happily, for they have chosen wisely.

Although Jane Austen writes comedy, her attitude toward women is serious. Her heroines are not foolish, frivolous girls, though there is Lydia Bennet to remind us that Jane Austen knows the type well; their insistence on

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[30] The Great Tradition (Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 8.

[31] p. 41.

[32] p. 120.

their own way leads to ultimate unhappiness. Nor does the highly romantic girl of exaggerated sensibilities (the heroines of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels) inspire in her any feeling but the desire to parody her extremes. Jane Austen's mind, embued with the spirit of "dear Dr. Johnson," cannot accept seriously the spirit of sentimental "enthusiasm." Her principal concern is that of the young women whom she admires: Elizabeth Bennet--of whom Jane Austen wrote, "I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print;"[33] Emma Woodhouse, "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like;"[34] and Anne Elliot, who receives only qualified approval, "You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me."[35] They achieve self-knowledge which enables them to recognize their faults. After their misconceptions and false illusions are swept away, they are able to accept reality and thus have a chance for happiness.

For Jane Austen happiness cannot be based on illusion --she sees the world perfectly clearly; part of her genius is this clarity of vision which goes to the heart of the matter at hand, penetrating through all falsity. She sees that society, made up as it is of preponderantly irrational creatures, is a fragile entity. However imperfect (its

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[33] Letters, II p. 297, quoted in Wright, p. 105.

[34] Memoir, p. 157, quoted in Chapman, p. 88.

[35] W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, March 1817, p. 352.

false standards are the subject of both her satire and direct moral criticism), it is all that separates human beings from chaos.[36] Those who violate its conventions, such as Maria Bertram (in Mansfield Park), suffer social ostracism. It therefore devolves upon those with reason, who understand the precariousness of the human condition, to conform to the conventions, artificial as they may be, for the alternative leads to the destruction of all that man has been able to achieve. Civilization depends on acceptance of the standards and actions that support them. Thus Elizabeth Bowen states:

> The constraints of polite behavior serve only to shore up her characters' energies. It is true she [Jane Austen] has drawn no rebels: her people expect, and derive, pleasure from the straight-forward living of life. But they plan; they seek...ideal relationships inside that world they already know. They locate, and never far from themselves, possible darkness, chaos.[37]

Thus it followed that Jane Austen accepted her position and that of women in her social class without rebellion, but that is not to say, without criticism. She had no interest in reform on a broad scale comparable to the women's movement today; reform, as it resulted in her heroines' reform of their errors in perception of themselves and the world, however, was a major theme of the novels. Those characters who are incapable of seeing the truth,

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[36] Edwin Muir, "Jane Austen and the Sense of Evil," New York Times Book Review, August 28, 1949, p. 1.

[37] p. 25.

usually minor characters, are tolerated for Jane Austen's comic spirit finds amusement in their folly. Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins are creations of her highest comic genius; Miss Bates, because she has sensitivity and thus suffers from Emma's rudeness, is viewed sympathetically even though she is the epitome of the world's bores. Only Mrs. Norris is shown no mercy; nor does she deserve any, being Jane Austen's only thoroughly evil character.

Perhaps Jane Austen's basic good sense, that quality which she extolled above all others, led her to accept women's position which had been entrenched too long for her to feel any inclination to attempt to change it. Moreover her interest lay always with individuals and their personal relationships not with groups and classes. Muir observes that it is to Jane Austen's advantage that she accepts society, for "her account of personal relations is not confused or blurred by thoughts of a better society in which things could be more satisfactorily arranged."[38] She recognized the inequities of her society and the status of women, but her weapon was good-natured satire and not invective. Her inclination was always to make the best of what life offered, to work within society's framework and conventions, and to seek fulfillment in service to her family and in her writing.

Even Jane Austen, however--the young girl of precocious

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[38] p. 1.

wit and humor, well-loved sister, adored aunt, and somewhat retiring spinster of later years--had another side. If her keen observation of the all-too-human frailties of those about her usually took the form, in her novels, of comic irony, several modern critics have also discerned an undertone of bitterness, which D. W. Harding (1940) calls "regulated hatred."[39] More recently (1970) Yasmine Gooneratne has said,

> It is clear from the letters that Jane Austen was not in complete harmony with her society.... They give us a glimpse of the feelings she could not express in public, or to anyone outside her own circle. They suggest that her immediate (and perhaps, unending) problem was how to conform, outwardly at least and without hypocrisy, to the requirements of polite, civilised behaviour.[40]

She concludes:

> ...Part of her compulsion to write novels was the need to expand the area of freedom she enjoyed in her letters: the personal need...to create a world in which her own beliefs and ideals need be no longer disguised, and could assert themselves in the characters of 'real' people, influencing 'human' behaviour.[41]

Miss Gooneratne sees the heroines in the novels living in societies that are basically hostile to them; where they are surrounded by "voluntary spies;" where parents (Mrs. Bennet, the Prices, and Sir Walter Elliot) fail to appreciate them; where true friends are few; and where intelligent women must suffer the conversation of provincial society.

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[39] "Regulated Hatred," Scrutiny 8 (March 1940): 346.

[40] p. 17.

[41] Ibid., p. 18.

It seems to me that these observations might be made of any society at any time, for they are a part of the world of reality--as much now as then. Jane Austen's heroines had to learn to accommodate themselves to these facts of life, as did their creator, but never does sheimply that there are not other pleasanter aspects of life that outweigh these, and the sensible woman will make the most of them. The final impression of the world that she creates is analogous to the people who inhabit it--neither perfectly good nor completely bad. Her eighteenth-century ideal of the rational mean colors her thinking in this respect as in others. As there must be meeting ground between the extremes of sense and sensibility, pride and prejudice, art and nature, so must the rational heroine recognize that her expectations for happiness must be based on what is possible as well as what is right.[42]

It is in analyzing the options that were open to a young woman of Jane Austen's class in 1800 that we become aware of the greatest difference in the relative position of women today. Whereas, in theory at least, women are free to enter any profession and perform work of any kind today, the opposite was true one hundred seventy-five years ago. The only positions outside the home which a single gentle-

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[42]Samuel Kliger, "Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice in the Eighteenth Century Mode," Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 47.

woman could accept were governess or companion. If she were forced into keeping, or working in, a shop, as was Dorothy Gray, she was desperate indeed. More often she would subside into genteel poverty, as did Miss Bates, depending on the generosity of others to provide the amenities of life; or if that failed, sinking out of sight (Mrs. Smith in Persuasion did this) forgotten by a society which felt no responsibility for her welfare. Actually women's opportunities for employment had decreased during the eighteenth century due to the appropriation by men of jobs formerly held by women: dressmaking, hairdressing, and stay-making.[43] It must be acknowledged that society was also blind to the needs of a far greater segment of the population whose condition was worsening rapidly, the poor of both sexes and all ages who were fed as fodder into the insatiable factories and mines of the industrial revolution. These people do not enter the novels of Jane Austen--their plight was not to be depicted until Dickens undertook to expose the evils of the factory system fifty years later, but she was acutely aware of the low status of single women. "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor,"[44] Jane Austen warned her niece. And when Emma explained to her protege, Harriet Smith, that she had no intention of marrying, Harriet replied incredulously, "But still you will

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[43] Doris Mary Stenton, The English Woman in History (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 320.

[44] W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, March 1817, p. 351.

be an old maid! and that's so dreadful!"

"Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid"[45] -- [and that makes all the difference].

But Jane Austen was not blessed with Emma's money. Even so, "The thought that a respectable woman might earn her own living never crossed Jane Austen's mind," Ellen Moers states emphatically, "except to fill it with revulsion."[46] These are strong words to apply to a writer who greatly enjoyed the sense of independence that the sale of her books brought her. The remark may be justified by making the distinction that Jane Austen did not write in order to make money; but she welcomed it, little as it was, nevertheless.[47] In general the men of her class also were unemployed, or rather, at leisure. The Puritan work ethic was unknown among the landed class in England and it would have been hard to explain even to Jane Austen.

> To the genteel classes of her time, a man should ideally be something and have something, but not <u>do</u> anything to be or to have...and to take a job seems beyond Austen's imagining. So rare indeed is the subject in 19th-century English fiction generations after Austen that one might think--which is not true--that jobholding simply did not exist as a viable possibility for the middle classes.[48]

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[45] <u>Emma</u>, p. 85.

[46] "Money, the Job, and Little Women," <u>Commentary</u> 55 (January, 1973): 39.

[47] "I have now therefore written myself in to £250--which only makes me long for more." Quoted in Jenkins, p. 247.

[48] Moers, pp. 59-60.

Of course men, usually younger sons, did enter the professions: the law, clergy, army and navy, the latter being Jane Austen's favorite due to her brothers' successful careers. The professions are represented in the novels as occupations for John Knightly, a barrister; Edmund Bertram and Edward Ferrars, clergymen; Captain Tilney and George Wickham, the army; and Frederick Wentworth and William Price, the navy. They are all either younger sons, or, as in the case of Wickham and Price, dependent upon patronage for attaining their positions, for entry in these fields depended on influence rather than other qualifications.[49]

Today education is considered the prime requisite for preparation for any career and schools at all levels are open to women. But higher education has been available to women for only the last hundred years and professional schools for less than that. Only men went to the universities, where the curriculum consisted exclusively of the classics. Girls were taught by their mothers, or attended neighborhood dame schools, or boarding schools where the quality of instruction was generally poor. There seemed little purpose in demanding mental exertion of girls who would have no need for erudition in their future roles as wives. That Jane Austen was aware of the neglect she suffered in not having a classical background has been noted, but her acceptance of this missing element in her education is characteristic. Instead of feeling self-pity for

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[49] Gornall, 65:155.

the deprivation, she blames herself for not using her time more wisely. Later she tells her niece that she wished she had "written less and read more before the age of sixteen."[50]

One of her strongest comments, one cited as evidence of Jane Austen's "hatred" by those who find this theme in her writing, concerns female education in those establishments where girls "for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity"[51] without apparently learning anything worthwhile. It is the violence of the verb screwed that jars the reader for it seems inappropriate in tone. The connotation--the tension of force being applied to a resistant surface--carries too powerful an image for the occasion. What Jane Austen felt strongly about, however, was not the poor quality of the instruction, but the neglect of the girls' health. Her heroines (with the exception of Fanny Price) are all vigorous, energetic, and fond of the outdoors, as she was herself;[52] Elizabeth Bennet shocks the Misses Bingley by walking three miles through wet grass and mud to see her sister Jane who was ill at their home; Emma is described by Mrs. Weston as the "picture of grown-up health. She is loveliness itself."[53] They are the anti-

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[50] Quoted in Personal Aspects of Jane Austen, p. 52.

[51] Vol. 4, Emma, p. 22.

[52] Jenkins, "'I enjoyed the hard black Frosts of last week very much, and one day while they lasted, walked to Deane by myself,'" p. 97.

[53] Vol. 4, Emma, p. 39.

theses of the sickly, pale, and listless heroines of the sentimental novel popular in that day. Only Fanny Price suffers from headaches and unexplained fatigue, but her appearance improves--her cheeks become rosy, she is less tired, and she actually appears to grow taller--as she progresses in love and toward its realization.

The other aspect of Jane Austen's criticism of expensive schools is that they force girls to become vain. In other words, the pupils leave school diminished in physical health and in common sense. Vanity is one of the sins which Jane Austen finds most reprehensible, for it leads to that corresponding fault to which so many of her characters are prone--self-delusion. Apparently the mere thought of an institution that deliberately encouraged the natural human inclination to self-pride drew forth her undisguised contempt, for this is one of the few instances in Emma of the author's voice breaking through. Elsewhere the point of view is almost consistently Emma's.

It is unfortunate that there is no evidence that Jane Austen was familiar with the works of her contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft, for they have a common concern for women's place in society however different their approaches. Mary Wollstonecraft was interested at first, in education for women that prepared them for the duties of being wives, and later, that enabled women to develop their minds. She saw that women had been forced into poverty because of their lack of training for employment and control of their

money. Her own life was one of struggle and disappointment in which she early recognized that her father's brutality had utterly destroyed her mother's will and personality. Determined to avoid such a fate herself, she decided at the age of fifteen that she would never marry.[54] Her first successful writing was Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1788) which Steeves thinks might have been given to Jane Austen to read as there was nothing in it that would have offended her father's taste.[55]

Jane Austen is known to have been a reader of sermons and this was full of good advice on the type of education best suited to prepare girls for marriage. Its theme was one that Jane Austen was to develop later in Sense and Sensibility--advocating training girls in useful practical ways and encouraging reliance on good sense instead of foolish extremes of sensibility in approaching problems of marriage.[56]

It seems reasonable to surmise that Mary Wollstonecraft's book espousing revolutionary ideas, Vindications of the Rights of Women (1792) would not, however, have been received sympathetically by Jane Austen had she read it, for there was nothing of the rebel in her nature. Mary Wollstonecraft was the only woman writer openly to advocate a woman's right to live independently and to be considered

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[54]Ralph Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), p. 7.

[55]p. 379. [56]Ibid.

man's intellectual equal. She was a firebrand, passionate in speech, loyalty, and love. Her concern was for the betterment of all women; Jane Austen's concern, however, was for individuals to find the truth of reality for themselves. Mary Wollstonecraft defied society's conventions in order to live according to her personal standards; Jane Austen chose to live in such retirement that she would receive no public notice. Elizabeth Jenkins says that in so living, "...she was actually obeying a profound instinct of self-preservation....[To have taken any public stand] would have threatened that capacity of vision that was the inspiration of her art."[57]

Other women novelists had touched on the subject of women's rights. Charlotte Smith had broached the topic timidly in Emmeline (a book with which Jane Austen was familiar), whereas Mary Wollstonecraft attacked the subject in The Rights of Women in the "white heat of passion"[58] and fury. The bitter tone of her writing may have shocked the public as much as her message, for while the best and most widely read novelists of the time were women, only men were expected to treat the so-called serious subjects. The dominant theme of the political and philosophical writers in the last quarter of the eighteenth century--Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire, Godwin, and Paine--was revolution.[59] Mary Woll-

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[57]p. 363.

[58]Stenton, p. 316.

[59]p. 379.

stonecraft's goal of freedom for women was no less revolutionary than liberty, equality, fraternity, and representative government, and has taken longer to be achieved.

We do not know whether Jane Austen was familiar with the writings of any of these intellectual movers of the day, but their ideas were known to thoughtful people so perhaps Jane Austen knew them if not the individual writings. It has been noted, however, that while Jane Austen was well-read, her family, as was characteristic of their class, were not intellectually excited by ideas. For example, that they read novels for entertainment is attested by Jane Austen's spirited defense of that pastime in Northanger Abbey.[60] Her abrupt dismissal of politics as a subject unworthy of discussion is also mentioned in Northanger Abbey.[61] Her only historical references are to personalities rather than to trends and her remarks on literary topics are personal and practical, addressed as they are for the most part to those members of her family who sought her advice about their own writing. Later descendants, W. Austen-Leigh and R. A. Austen-Leigh, analyzed the question of learning in the following interesting way:

> ...members of [the family were] educated according to the fashion of the times, intelligent, and refined; but not especially remarkable for learning or original thought...She [Jane Austen] had no inducement, such as might come from the influence of superior intellects, to dive into difficult problems. Her mental efforts were purely her own, and they led in another direction.[62]

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[60] pp. 37-38 [61] p. 111. [62] p. 239.

Perhaps it would be safe to hypothesize, though, that had Jane Austen read Rousseau's works she would surely have satirized his low opinion of women's intelligence; nor would she have been in accord with his glorification of the primitive, for her outlook had been formed from reading in the earlier eighteenth-century school of reason which emphasized the importance of decorum.[63]

Jane Austen not only accepted society because she had no inclination to rebel, but because she saw that individual freedom is best attained within a society which adheres to standards of conduct and propriety which do not fluctuate. Blind conformity to rules of etiquette, however, is of no interest to her.[64] She believes that if one acts rationally, on the dual basis of correct moral judgment and common sense, good manners will come naturally. Disinterestedness, consideration, self-control, self-knowledge, recognition of reality, are valid ideals for any age; thus Jane Austen's standards, while deriving from the eighteenth century, are not limited to that time, but are universal.

If Jane Austen's standards were diametrically opposed to Rousseau's, they were closer to Mary Wollstonecraft's than might seem apparent. Both women believed that women should not only be rational, but should be treated as rational beings by men. Both saw that women acted foolishly as a result of their social conditioning--that men expected and wanted them to be irrational (so they could

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[63]Stevenson, p. 190.

[64]Steeves, p. 370.

feel superior) and that their training from childhood enforced corresponding patterns of behavior. It was on this aspect of education that both Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft agreed. Sir Thomas Bertram (Mansfield Park) learned to his sorrow that his daughter Maria stooped to folly, not because her education in the schoolroom had been defective, but because her moral training had been deficient. Is not man the poorer when he chooses a pretty face over an intelligent mind? Darcy chose well when he chose the latter, but Mr. Bennet and Mr. Palmer (Sense and Sensibility) had a lifetime to regret their choices. Mary Wollstonecraft deplored conditions that left all girls to be uneducated and therefore stupid mates for intelligent men. Mona Wilson concludes, "...these two, the reformer with her head full of theories, and the artist who never troubled about women's rights or any other cause, used their pens with equal force to the same intent, indeed the younger [Jane Austen] was for many years, perhaps always for one sex, the more effective of the two."

Modern feminists have taken as one of their basic tenets the same idea--that both men and women suffer because women are trained from infancy to play a role conditioned by economic necessity to please men. In so doing they are stunted in intellectual growth, forced to accept secondary positions in society, and lose their integrity by

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Jane Austen and Some Contemporaries (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1938, 1966), p. 33.

adopting false guises to attract men. It is due to the latter that women suffer most. Man, too, pays a price for this travesty of human dignity--he is deprived of the love of a completely developed woman. In the second half of the twentieth century the relations between the sexes are still based on illusion and false values, those twin demons that Jane Austen sought to exorcise.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMAN'S GOALS

Jane Austen's young women were limited in their choices for the future: they were free to choose a husband from the men in their social circle, but not free to engage in a career or occupation outside the home. If they were unsuccessful in finding a husband, what was their fate? What did it mean to be a spinster in Regency England? The status of the single woman would affect the young girl's outlook on her future, and on her view concerning the desirability of marriage. As an individual, married or single, what chance had she for self-fulfillment? These are questions that women have always faced and are as relevant today as they were in Jane Austen's time.

The opportunities for women in this century are immeasurably greater, due to the efforts of those dedicated women who followed the trail blazed by Mary Wollstonecraft, but their ultimate goals have not changed. Young women married then as now for both love and security, the difference being that the emphasis is less on security today--though that motive is not entirely absent. The modern woman's confidence in her ability to achieve economic independence is a result of her education and the changes in social mores that permit, if they do not actually encourage, her to have

a career.

Another aspect of this change is that the pressure on her to marry, regardless of her feelings, has been reduced. No longer need she fear the apparition of genteel poverty as did Jane Austen's heroines. In the mid-twentieth centruy Charlotte Lucas (in Pride and Prejudice), who failed to find a man whom she could truly love and so accepted a man she despised--Mr. Collins--would have had an alternative: she would obviously have been better off if she could have had a job and supported herself.[1] Another character who would have benefitted from having a job, even though there was no financial necessity, was the central figure of Emma. Her duties as mistress of Hartfield did not occupy enough of either her time or energy to keep her out of mischief.[2] By meddling in the affairs of other people, she nearly ruined several lives, including her own.

Nonetheless, are financial security, whether provided by her husband or herself, and involvement in a job really all that young women want from life? Even if Charlotte could have afforded to reject Mr. Collins, would she have found fulfillment in her career? Are most well-to-do girls today, Emma's modern counterparts, serious about their working lives, or are they merely marking time until they marry? Until recently these questions would never have arisen (we have noted that the idea of earning her living did not occur to Jane Austen), but the problem is a criti-

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[1]Jenkins, p. 159. [2]Ibid., pp. 284-85.

cal one for women today when increasingly young women are looking ahead to a future which includes both marriage and work outside the home. It is in their attitudes toward work and marriage that the greatest change may be seen not only between Jane Austen's day and the present, but also between a generation ago and the present.

Self-fulfillment has become the goal that takes precedence over all others in planning women's lives. Marriage is no longer considered the only means through which they can express themselves. Quite the contrary, it now appears to many to be the dominant factor of women's oppression in our society; thus women today look at work from a different perspective than in the past; they hope to find satisfaction in it through expression of their own identity. In the past the only vehicle for a woman's self-expression was the domestic realm encompassing the private concerns of her family and home. In society, however, her identity derived from her husband's--she was some man's wife. This borrowed identity no longer suffices for today's woman who has responded to the vocal and persuasive feminists who aroused her in the 1960's. It is this serious commitment to self-realization through work, with marriage as a pleasant but no essential adjunct, that constitutes the greatest change in young women's point of view from Jane Austen's time, when marriage was the "pleasantest preservative from want,"[3] to the present. It remains to be

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[3]Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, pp. 122-23.

seen which course leads eventually to greater happiness, but it would be unreasonable to expect that in a society which is changing as rapidly as ours, women would be content to continue in eighteenth-century roles of subservience.

Jane Austen's solution to the search for fulfillment was always to reward her heroines for their increased moral and social perception with happy marriages. It should be recognized, however, that marriage was not their prime concern. Elizabeth Bennet, responding to Charlotte Lucas' suggestion concerning the possible marriage of Jane and Bingley, says,

> "Your plan is a good one, where nothing is in question but the desire to be well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it. But these are not Jane's feelings; she is not acting by design."[4]

The women who showed "the overbearing desire for romance, or sexual satisfaction, or marriage, or all of these, as such, irrespective of a genuine attraction,"[5] Elizabeth Jenkins observes, are secondary characters. Their poor judgment condemns them in Jane Austen's eyes while the reader is amused at their follies. Lucy Steele's willingness (in Sense and Sensibility) to jilt one brother, who had been disinherited because of his engagement to her, in order to accept the other, the recipient of his elder brother's lost property, makes clear that in her scale of values the choice of the man who is to be her husband ranks

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[4]Ibid., p. 22. [5]p. 159.

a poor third following consideration of his fortune and the fact that she is marrying at all. Another young woman, Isabella Thorpe, who is the foil to Catherine Morland's naivete and essential goodness, is so anxious both to "get her man" and like Lucy, to get one with a fortune, she throws over the worthy John Morland for the richer Captain Tilney only to find the latter has no intention of marrying her.

The most fatuous commentary on choosing a mate--the one with whom one is to spend one's entire life and on whom one relies for love, companionship, the satisfaction of one's desires, and support in life's crises--is given from the man's point of view, John Dashwood's in Sense and Sensibility.

> "We think now," said Mr. Dashwood, after a short pause, "of Robert's marrying Miss Morton."
> Elinor, smiling at the grave and decisive importance of her brother's tone, calmly replied--
> "The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair?"
> "Choice!--how do you mean?"
> "I only mean, that I suppose from your manner of speaking, it must be the same to Miss Morton whether she marry Edward or Robert."
> "Certainly, there can be no difference; for Robert will now to all intents and purposes be considered as the eldest son; and as to anything else, they are both very agreeable young men--I do not know that one is superior to the other."[6]

The reader can only conclude that this being the way Mr. Dashwood perceives the finer qualities of character and relates them to marriage, he has, indeed, the wife he deserves and justice has been served.

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[6]Vol. 1, pp. 296-97.

In Jane Austen's ordered world, where the greedy, the cunning, and the obtuse meet their just rewards, the heroines--the girls in whom their creator felt such intense interest that she acknowledged their lives continued in her imagination outside the pages of the books--are not neglected, for their husbands are all that they desire and need for their fulfillment. "It was clearly her considered opinion...that a happy marriage was the best thing for everybody,"[7] Miss Jenkins notes. The word to stress here is happy, for Jane Austen, who did not marry herself, never advocated marriage without love. In a letter to a niece, she wrote: "Nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without love, bound to one and preferring another."[8]

There are examples in the novels of a variety of types of marriage: those based on sexual attraction only--Lydia Bennet and Wickham (Lydia repeating her mother's role of a generation earlier); those based on thoughtless emotion with no regard to economic realities--the Prices (Mansfield Park); those based on desire for economic security regardless of integrity--Charlotte Lucas; on social position--Maria Bertram and Mr. Rushworth (in Mansfield Park), and Augusta Hawkins and Mr. Elton (in Emma); and those based on acceptance of a second choice, Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon.

Because the novels are comedies, however, the heroines inevitably find suitable mates. But Jane Austen is too

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[7]p. 159. [8]W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, Nov. 1814, p. 346.

realistic to ignore completely the other side of life. Overtones of potential tragedy are present, principally in Mansfield Park and Persuasion; nevertheless, the dark possibilities that await the girls who are unsuccessful in the courting game are alluded to in all the novels. The tension and movements leading to the final resolution have been compared to those of the dance. David Daiches thus dramatizes the fate of those who fail:

> It is a stately dance on the lawn--but all around there are the dark trees, the shadows. And if you do not dance well, if you have not been able, by the end of the day, to secure a permanent partner with whom to walk off the lawn, you are left, when the sun sets, alone amid the shadows. We are never allowed to forget that possibility, never allowed to forget what a serious business this dancing is. One false step can be fatal. One must keep one's equilibrium on a razor's edge, with the fate of Charlotte Lucas and Miss Bates...waiting on the other side. Jane Fairfax's bitter remark about the white slave market in London was not introduced simply to make conversation.[9]

It is risky to say unequivocally that a certain character is stating the author's own thoughts, but occasionally a sharp note breaks through that contrasts with the tone of the passage as a whole, an example of which--the reference to the girls' schools--has been cited.[10] Another is Jane Fairfax's outburst about the position of governess. She has no family to support her and is determined to become self-reliant, refusing to accept further help from

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[9]"Jane Austen, Karl Marx, and the Aristocratic Dance," American Scholar 18 (1958): 251.

[10]See chap. 1, p. 11.

those who befriended her when she was younger. Until this time she has appeared to be quiet, retiring, and correct, the object of much admiration for both her accomplishments and her courage. When she is under pressure to apply to an acquaintance for a post as governess, her reaction is bitter and seemingly out of character. She describes employment offices as

> "Offices for the sale of--not quite human flesh--but of human intellect...I do not mean, I was not thinking of the slave trade,...governess-trade... was all I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies."[11]

For once the reader's response corresponds to Mrs. Elton's; "Oh, my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me." We too are shocked, not so much by the words (as was Mrs. Elton), but by their tone, revealing as it does Jane Fairfax's desperation, which is more like Mary Wollstonecraft's than Jane Austen's. To be reduced to selling one's intellect can only result in misery--a high price to be paid for independence. The intensity of despair with which Jane Fairfax, who is always held up to Emma as a model of decorum, views her future must be kept in mind when considering her willingness to enter into a secret engagement (thereby defying convention) with the charming but insubstantial Frank Churchill. Jane Fairfax, unlike her modern counterpart, must choose between security and independence; in their realistic approach to the decision, neither she

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[11]Vol. 4, Emma, pp. 300-301.

nor her creator hesitated to choose security: to expect both would have been unreasonable.[12]

Jane Austen may have been speaking for herself as well as the other Jane, for she was cognizant of the fate of unprotected females in her society. Both she and her sister, Cassandra, as well as their mother, had to rely on Edward Knight for their support following Mr. Austen's death, and the possibility must have been present in her mind that if their situation worsened, she might have to become a governess. There is evidence in her letters that when she visited in Edward's home, she took particular notice of the governess.[13] Whether this was because she thought they had something in common--both being spinsters and dependents, one an employee and the other a poor relation occupying a position only slightly above that of the governess--we do not know. In the best situation the governess had a difficult place as she was neither a servant nor a lady; perhaps Jane Austen paid extra attention to this woman because in a large household of eleven children she saw the governess had an unenviable position.

In contrast to Jane Fairfax's harsh projection of her future, however, the book opens with the marriage of Emma's former governess, Miss Taylor, to Mr. Weston. Her sixteen years with the Woodhouses are described in an entirely different tone from that with which Jane Fairfax contemplates her employment, Miss Taylor having been "less...a

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[12]Kettle, pp. 116-117. [13]Liddell, p. 115.

governess than a friend.... Between [Emma and Miss Taylor] it was more the intimacy of sisters. [Years] before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess."[14] These were then the two extremes which a young woman might encounter as governess: kind acceptance into a family or humiliation, hard work, and neglect; at any rate she was entirely at the mercy of her employers' disposition.[15] The position of dependent must always be repugnant to those of spirit so even the worthy (and lucky) Miss Taylor was glad to marry the amicable Mr. Weston and, as Emma was quick to point out to her father, to "have a house of her own." Because she is a thoroughly estimable character, she is rewarded with the affection and comfort she deserves.

Thus in an age when government provided no social security or services, it was imperative that a woman show good sense in balancing the desires of her heart with an eye to provision for her future. As Cecil has put it succinctly, "It was wrong to marry for money, but it was silly to marry without it."[16] In the novels the heroines unanimously reject suitors who can offer only financial security, however; Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Collins; Fanny

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[14]Vol. 4, Emma, p. 91.

[15]Mary Wollstonecraft was fired from her position as governess in a noble family when her employer, Lady Kingsborough, became jealous of the hold she had on her children's affection. Wardle, p. 78.

[16]p. 33.

Price, Henry Crawford; and Anne Elliot, her cousin, Mr. Elliot. Even the basically good characters such as Charlotte Lucas and Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram make the mistake of moral judgment in seeing the monetary advantages of marriage as its prime importance outweighing all others. Fanny Price, for all her humility and lack of assertiveness, stands firm against the tremendous pressures that the Bertrams exert on her to marry Henry Crawford whom she does not love. Sir Thomas learns to regret giving his approval to his daughter Maria's marriage to Mr. Rushworth although he was fully aware that she did not love him. The attraction of the match rested entirely on the impressiveness of Rushworth's estate ("She had pledged herself anew to Sotherton"[17] [that is, the estate, not the man]) which did not prove sufficiently interesting to Maria to compensate after marriage for her husband's denseness and stupidity. Thus both Maria and her parents suffered from their shortsightedness.

In Sense and Sensibility there are two examples of men who are dependent on the caprices of wealthy women for their support. Their reactions contrast strikingly to the threatened loss each will suffer if he persists in courting the young woman of whom his benefactoress disapproves. Edward Ferrars, not otherwise an interesting character, defies his tyrannical mother, who cuts him off from her financial support and gives his inheritance to his brother,

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[17]Vol. 3, Mansfield Park, p. 201.

in order to marry the equally fortuneless Elinor. Willoughby, on the other hand, who has captivated the impressionable Marianne, leaves her when he learns that his wealthy aunt has chosen an heiress for him to marry--a move which he regrets thereafter.[18] Lady Catherine de Bourgh is another relative who tries to prevent her nephew from marrying beneath him both socially and materially, but Darcy thwarts her in his determination to win Elizabeth, who in turn is warned by her father against marrying Darcy --since he thinks she is doing so only for the same advantages. His words of admonition summarize what may be considered Jane Austen's statement of the grounds which constitute a good marriage (with the exception of Mr. Bennet's remarks about male superiority):

> "I know you would be neither happy nor respectable unless you truly esteemed your husband--unless you looked up to him as your superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage."[19]

There are two lines of thought here: male superiority and equality in marriage. While Jane Austen emphasizes the concept of mutual respect, she also gives an example of male chauvinism--man thinks that a woman is happiest when she acknowledges her inferiority and recognizes her good fortune in having a husband who controls her life. The irony, of course, is that Mr. Bennet, in urging Elizabeth

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[18]Gornall, "Marriage, Property, and Romance in Jane Austen's Novels," 66:29.

[19]Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, p. 376.

to avoid the errors he made in his marriage, reveals his irritation in having a wife who does not look up to him as her superior. Neither Mr. Bennet nor Mrs. Bennet respects the other and though Mr. Bennet is her superior in intelligence, Mrs. Bennet sees only his lack of consideration in failing to provide for his survivors. Theirs is indeed an unequal marriage both in the character, temperament, and understanding of its principals, and in their social status as well, for while Mr. Bennet is a gentleman (Elizabeth says, "I am a gentleman's daughter."),[20] Mrs. Bennet, being an attorney's daughter, was not his equal.

The customary way for the heirs of large properties, such as Mr. Darcy, to add to their fortunes was through marriage alliances with consanguineous families or with the new-rich whose money by 1800 was beginning to come through trade. Lady Catherine had the first method in mind when she planned for Darcy to marry her daughter Anne (who was his first cousin) and Miss Bingley hoped the second arrangement would make her mistress of Pemberly. It is in rejecting them both and choosing Elizabeth that Darcy shows he is indeed in love. Elizabeth's gifts of love and her "lively talents" are more important to him than money. It is only after correcting their early false impressions that both Elizabeth and Darcy show they have gained in understanding and are therefore ready for marriage. Theirs is not a compromise with its implication of loss, but a true

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[20]Ibid., p. 356

union which benefits both--a marriage of equals in all but fortune.[21]

What about Jane Austen, the creator of these delightful couples, she who had to forego all the pleasures of a happy marriage such as she envisaged for her favorites--Elizabeth, Emma, and Anne? Were these successful courtships a form of wish-fulfillment on the part of the author? Elizabeth Jenkins thinks not,[22] but a convincing case has been made for Jane Austen's identification with the most mature of these characters, Anne Elliot. It has become necessary to consider Jane Austen as a person, an artist, a family member, and a spinster apart from her novels in order to see how a talented woman managed to fulfill her potential in an age when to express interest in women's rights was to be labelled a revolutionary. Marriage being the normal expectation for women then as now, the question of Jane Austen's attitude toward it is significant. Since she herself remained single, the degree of objectivity with which she broached the subject is noteworthy. Nowhere does she romanticize the pleasures of marriage; neither does she reflect the bitterness one might expect from a single woman. Of course, when she first wrote Pride and Prejudice (then called First Impressions) and Northanger Abbey, she was young herself, flirting, attending balls, and undoubtedly expecting to marry. That she was able to produce her most

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[21]A. Walton Litz, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 102.

[22]p. 365.

highly comic work Emma (1815) when she was forty on the same theme as Pride and Prejudice including in it five marriages says a great deal for her spirit and attitude. If she thought marriage on the whole "the best solution for everybody," where did she consider that she fit in? Did she feel bypassed by life, or at least a most pleasurable part of it? We know that she was rather reserved in company[23] toward the end of her life, but she was always open with her family and particularly close to her niece Fanny Knight, Edward's eldest child. It is from her correspondence with her as well as from the recollections of members of her immediate family that the full picture of Jane Austen emerges as the utter realist who accepted life as it was, found amusement wherever possible, and refused to be frustrated by the unattainable.

Virginia Woolf, one of Jane Austen's most sensitive critics observes:

> I could find no signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest. That, perhaps, was the chief miracle about it. Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without preaching...If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances, it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed on her....But perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely.[24]

This is surely the ideal formula for a happy productive life--"not to want what she had not"--but it is the antithesis of the attitude of present-day feminists, or revolutionaries of any time for that matter.

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[23]Jenkins, p. 159

[24]A Room, p. 71.

This view that Jane Austen, the conservative who chose to work within the existing system, was completely satisfied with the conditions under which she lived, is too comfortable and facile for the critic Marvin Mudrick. He challenges its thesis by analyzing Jane Austen's habitual ironic point of view and concludes that she uses this irony as a device to protect her from the realities of society which she finds too distasteful to confront openly. He finds her reluctant to become intimately involved with those around her, maintaining always a distance between herself and others because she disapproves of their triviality, insincerity, and insensitivity.[25] The weakness of his thesis is that he ignores the humor that is so intrinsic a part of at least three of the novels--Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice, and Emma. Nor does he allow for the instances in which irony is not destructive, as in Jane Austen's depiction of Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse.[26]

There were actually many circumstances of Jane Austen's life that were advantageous to her writing, the fact that she was single being one of them. Not that she was opposed to marriage--her books testify too strongly to the desirability of finding the right partner for life to question that. (But as a matter of statistics, the unhappy outnumber the happy ones in the books--she was no romantic.)

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[25]Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 178.

[26]Hough, p. 211.

However, neither of the two opportunities she had to marry (that we know of) were fruitful.

Concerning the first there are conflicting family stories, but her brief romance with an unnamed man seems to have been the only time she gave her heart freely and completely. Years later Cassandra said that he was worthy of her, which was the highest accolade he could have been given. Jane Austen was a woman who could have loved a man deeply. Her standards were very high, but not impossibly so. It was her misfortune that when she did meet a man to whom she was deeply attracted, in the summer of 1801, and who fell in love with her, their intimacy had not time to develop. They parted after a holiday spent in Devonshire expecting to meet again; the next word Jane Austen received concerning him was of his death.[27]

There are no letters extant written by Jane Austen during the next three years, nor is there any reference to this sad affair later. Cassandra, before her own death in 1845, destroyed a large number of Jane's letters addressed to her, all of those which she considered were of a personal nature (which would therefore have been of inestimable interest today). Whether she chose to shield her sister's deepest concerns from public perusal, or whether she had no concept of posterity's probable interest in anything related to her, we do not know. Her nephew, James Edward

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[27]Jenkins, pp. 129-30. [28]Quoted in Chapman, p. 63.

Austen-Leigh, offers the following opinion on the effect of this blighted romance on his aunt: "I believe that, if Jane ever loved, it was this unnamed gentleman; but the acquaintance had been short, and I am unable to say whether her feelings were of such a nature as to affect her happiness."[28] Elizabeth Jenkins thinks that this experience did indeed affect her as is attested by the absence of any letters from this period. One may surmise that Jane Austen's reaction to her grief must have resembled Elinor Dashwood's, which she concealed from all as she continued in her daily round. It was not in Jane Austen's nature to impose her sorrow on anyone else, to expect preferential treatment because of it, or to neglect her duties to her family. Elizabeth Jenkins summarizes her conclusions:

> To say that people can get over their unhappiness is not to make light of it, or to underestimate its influence on their lives long after the pain has ceased to be felt; but to say of someone else ...made as determined an effort as possible to overcome distress...that such a person never recovered from a love affair that end disastrously in early life...is surely to show an extraordinary lack of comprehension of the essentials of her character.[29]

The fact remains that there is no direct reference by Jane Austen to this unhappy affair either in the three years following her suitor's death or any time later. Anne Elliot's remark in Persuasion is the closest she came to to making a direct comment of her own disappointment: "All the privileges I claim for my own sex (it is not a

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[28]Quoted in Chapman, p. 63. [29]pp. 131-32.

very enviable one--you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."[30] Virginia Woolf refers to the event of fifteen years earlier when she says "experience, when it was of a serious kind, had to sink very deep,...before she allowed herself to deal with it in fiction. But now, in 1817, she was ready." She continues, noting the new element in this novel, the stress on Anne Elliot's emotion, "proves not merely the biographical fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so."[31] Surely Anne's development was patterned on her own. "She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older--the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning."[32] Mudrick points out, "If this last remark sounds to us irresistibly biographical, Jane Austen has only the tone of her earlier books, and the contrast of this last one, to blame."[33]

In a lighter vein, but significant nonetheless, was Jane Austen's comment to her beloved niece, Fanny, whom she had urged to give up a suitor she thought Fanny did not really love. Lest Fanny be overly concerned with his injured feelings, Jane Austen assured her, "It is no creed of mine, as you must be well aware, that such sort of disappointments kill anybody."[34] It is true they do not kill,

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[30]Vol. 5, p. 235.

[31]The Common Reader, p. 205.

[32]Vol. 5, Persuasion, p. 30.

[33]p. 225.

[34]W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, November 1814, p. 345.

but Anne Elliot's touching allusion to woman's constancy is surely closer to Jane Austen's real feeling. This remark may be seen as an example of what Mudrick calls "irony as defense," where the defense is against the pain of recollection rather than the shield behind which Jane Austen habitually (he thinks) hides her anti-social feelings.[35]

In 1802 Jane Austen came closer to being engaged; in fact, she was actually engaged, though only from one evening until the next morning. Mr. Bigg-Wither, the owner of a fine neighboring estate--Manydown Park--and the brother of two of her fondest friends, proposed to Jane Austen while she was staying at his home and she accepted. During the night she must have weighed all the advantages of the match against her own affections and found the latter deficient. The decision to retract her acceptance the next morning was extremely painful and her motives bear examining in the light of what her critics call her heroines' mercenary approach to marriage.

One of these is Mark Schorer, who discusses the atmosphere of what he calls "the marriage market" that pervades Emma as evidenced by the buried metaphors which convey "the values of commerce and property, the counting house and the

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[35]A recent critic, Darrel Mansell, The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 154, interprets this episode very differently. He finds this an example of Jane Austen's interest in the concerns of others that is so intense it oversteps what Elizabeth Jenkins calls her "single-minded eager sympathy" (Jane Austen, p. 328.) and verges on the desire to manage others seen manifested in Emma.

inherited estate."[36] Gornall notes that when Jane Austen observes Miss Maria Ward's luck in winning Sir Bertram, considering her dowry to be short by £3,000 of what he would have expected a wife to bring him, she was being absolutely accurate as to the rate of the marriage mart.[37] Charlotte Lucas, who had not had Miss Ward's luck, saw marriage to Mr. Collins as her only chance of "preservation from want." ("I am not romantic, you know, I never was. I ask only a comfortable home.")[38] She pays for her choice of security over integrity by loss of awareness, thus diminishing herself as a human being.[39] E. Rubinstein emphasizes the moral: "To give oneself to a man without desire, to accede to a polite form of prostitution, is to sacrifice what is most valuable in the self."[40] The list could be extended, but the point remains the same--the admirable characters seek neither marriage nor money as their first goal.

No one was more aware of the problems of the unmarried woman in her day than Jane Austen, who stated tersely, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor--

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[36] "The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse," Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 99.

[37] 66:26. [38] Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, p. 125.

[39] Mudrick, p. 109.

[40] "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Pride and Prejudice, p. 7.

which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony."[41] It was not, however, the determining factor when Jane Austen faced the problem herself. No one would have criticized her for accepting Mr. Bigg-Wither; everything favored the match including the secure financial position which he could offer her and from which she could help her mother should her father die and Cassandra if she did not marry. Such a match would also relieve her brothers of their financial burden in supporting her. None of these considerations, taken singly or together, was of sufficient force to prevail upon Jane Austen to give herself to a man whom she did not love. The esteem and respect she required her heroines feel for their suitors were not enough for her.[42] So after a night spent in an agony of regret, she retracted her pledge to Mr. Bigg-Wither, preferring to face the future alone rather than commit herself to an alliance that did not involve her deepest feelings.

No other suitor won Jane Austen's heart and in the years following Mr. Austen's death, Mrs. Austen, Cassandra and Jane Austen were dependent upon James, Edward, Henry, and Francis for their support. The years from 1800 to 1808 were the least productive of Jane Austen's career. By 1808

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[41]See chap. 2, p. 45.

[42]Nor was it enough for them, though admittedly, the deeper reaches of emotion are not described except in the case of the rapturous devotion of Anne Elliot to Fredrick Wentworth. That the young lovers felt deep romantic attachments is to be inferred, however.

she must have become reconciled to the fact that she was "a woman and unmarried in a society which maintains unmarried women on sufferance," as Mudrick states, "because she has nowhere to go and nothing to say."[43]

In this year one circumstance in her life changed for the better--no longer had she "nowhere to go," for Edward settled his mother and sisters in a house he owned in the village of Chawton, Hampshire, near Jane Austen's birthplace, Steventon. He had offered them a house on his Godmersham estate in Kent, which they turned down, apparently at Jane's behest. Miss Jenkins finds this decision a significant factor in Jane Austen's further development as a writer, calling it her instinct for self-preservation.[44] She must have realized that had they stayed at Kent, their household would have become an appendage of her brother's. The eight years during which she had had no settled home--and from time to time had shared rooms with Francis and his wife in addition to her mother, sister, and friend, Mary Lloyd--had taken toll on her creativity. If she were going to write seriously again, she was aware that she needed a greater degree of privacy and independence than would have been possible in a home near Godmersham. She would have appreciated Virginia Woolf's analysis of this basic need for the woman writer to have "a room of one's own."

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[43]p. 236.

[44]p. 192.

With her establishment at Chawton she entered what Miss Lascelles calls "her period of renewed confidence."[45] It was here that she rewrote Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, and Persuasion, and lived until her death. Thus in a second way she contradicts Mudrick's generalization about the typical spinster--she does indeed have a great deal to say. It is in this respect that she differs from her heroines whose personalities the reader is tempted to equate with the author's own. None of them is depicted as a gifted writer (one regrets the loss to the world of a novel based on such a young woman's problems, a book which only Jane Austen could have written) though they may share other characteristics of their creator. Elizabeth Bennet's outlook--"Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can;"[46] Elizabeth's and Emma's lively minds and quick tongues; Anne's enduring devotion--are surely Jane Austen's. They differ from her in that their problems and the solutions to them were structured and arranged by the author in her God-like capacity. As a real person, she had to accommodate herself to others, protecting and nourishing her genius under the less-than-ideal conditions of actual living.

If Jane Austen considered marriage was generally best for everyone, she was well aware that the single state had

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[45] p. 31.

[46] Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, p. 57.

its advantages, particularly for one who had in mind--if not a career--a serious avocation. The young woman today must also determine the degree of importance she attaches to her work before deciding to marry. In two major respects the possibility of combining a career and marriage has been made easier for her than for the young woman in the early nineteenth century: birth control and improved medical care for women. The choice of having children, limiting, or spacing them could only be managed in one way which Jane Austen described bluntly in a letter, "Good Mrs. Deedes! I hope she will get better of this Marianne, and then I wd. recommend to her and Mr. D. the simple regimen of separate rooms."[47] Of another acquaintance she wrote, "Mrs. Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children. Mrs. Benn has a 13th."[48] Nor was Jane Austen a stranger to the risks of maternity. Her brother Edward's wife bore eleven children in the fifteen years of their marriage and died giving birth to the last. Charles Austen lost his wife in bearing their fourth child, who also died.

Jane Austen took a great deal of interest in her many nieces and nephews--"I have always maintained the importance of aunts,"[49] she wrote to ten-year-old Caroline Austen whose sister, Anna, had just had her first child--but those

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[47]Quoted in Wilson, p. 37. [48]Ibid.

[49]W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, October 1815.

closest to her were Anna and Fanny, the eldest daughters of James and Edward. Although they were the same age, Anna married six years earlier than Fanny, a circumstance that Jane Austen reminded Fanny was to the latter's advantage. Fanny had been in and out of love several times when her aunt cautioned her, "I shall say as I have often said before, Do not be in a hurry [to marry]; depend upon it, the right man will come at last."[50] Anna provided herself an example of another reason not to rush into marriage. "Anna has a bad cold, looks pale, and we fear something else." Shortly after the birth of her second child in less than two years, Jane Austen wrote Fanny, "Anna has not a chance of escape;--Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty--I am very sorry for her."[51] She continues, "By not beginning the Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution and spirits, figure and countenance."[52]

The following letter is of particular interest because it shows what Jane Austen valued in this affectionate relationship which she shared with Fanny, for Jane Austen was not given to forming close ties. That the detached point of view is requisite for the ironist has been noted often, for a writer who becomes closely identified with

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[50]Ibid., Letter, March 1817, p. 351.

[51]Jenkins, p. 376.

[52]Wilson, pp. 40-41.

his characters runs the risk of losing his objectivity, a necessary component of irony. The maintenance of this distance was the result of natural temperament apparently, not a studied stance adopted by the writer, for it characterized Jane Austen from her earliest years. Thus any close bond which she felt assumes unusual significance, whether it be with a fictional character such as Anne Elliot, her sister Cassandra, or her niece Fanny. The following letter reveals much about the basis on which Fanny's attraction to the older woman rested.

> My dearest Fanny, You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my life...Oh, what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Niece [sic]--I shall hate when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affection.[53]

So what Jane Austen valued most was her niece's "delicious play of Mind," that quality which she must have found conspicuously wanting amongst her provincial acquaintances. She must have attended many dinners like the one the Coles gave in Emma, where the conversation consisted of

> a few clever things said, a few downright silly, but by much the larger proportion neither the one nor the other--nothing worse than every day remarks, dull repetitions, old news, and heavy jokes.[54]

No wonder Jane Austen dreaded the prospect of some day losing her lively niece's company. Intellectual pleasures, like others, need to be shared for both stimulation and

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[53] W. Austen-Leigh, Letter, February 1817, pp. 348-49.

[54] p. 219.

growth. The mind longs for sympathetic response as well as the heart.

Because this need may have been unfulfilled, whether she was conscious of it or not, Jane Austen must have suffered from the limitations of her immediate society. Chapman thinks that had she lived she would have been forced into the more stimulating company of other writers and public figures, although in 1816 she declined to attend a dinner in London at which Mme. de Stael was present.[55] Others disagree, citing Jane Austen's reluctance to appear in the capacity of an author.[56] To support either position is to speculate, but we do know that because she saw the immediate effect of marriage on the women in her family, she did not envy wives. Even Fanny, she feared, would be inevitably dragged down by cares and responsibilities that would destroy her imaginative side.

Anna had shown early promise as a writer, sending her aunt her works-in-progress for criticism, which she continued after her marriage despite the handicap of a growing family. Shortly after the birth of Anna's first child, Jemima, in 1815, Emma was published which prompted this note from Jane Austen,

> My Dear Anna,
> As I wish very much to see your Jemima, I am sure you will like to see my Emma, and have therefore great pleasure in sending it for your perusal.[57]

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[55] p. 135. [56] Jenkins, p. 362. [57] Ibid., p. 330.

In the post-Freudian world something might be made of this parallel which Jane Austen draws between her works and others' children. She was frank in exulting to Cassandra upon the receipt of the newly published Pride and Prejudice, "I want to tell you that I have got my own darling child from London."[58] Earlier she had been equally emphatic about her priorities employing the image of the infant. Cassandra had inquired whether the party she had helped Henry's wife give had distracted her from working on Sense and Sensibility, to which she replied: "No, indeed, I am never too busy to think of S. and S. I can no more forget it than a mother can forget her sucking child."[59] Many years later another niece analyzed her aunt's position:

> "But she always said her books were her children, and supplied her sufficient interest for her happiness; and some of her letters, triumphing over the married women of her acquaintance, and rejoicing in her own freedom from care, were most amusing."[60]

And so the writer who chose freedom and independence rather than an unfulfilling marriage was not merely compensated, but rewarded for her choice. Marriage may have been the "pleasantest preservative from want," but unless it offered a great deal more than endless childbearing

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[58] Ibid., p. 241.

[59] Ibid., pp. 215-16.

[60] Chapman, p. 67, letter by Mrs. Hubbock, Francis Austen's daughter, Catherine. Letters of 1 and 4 March, 1870.

accompanied by the hazard of early death, the artist chose wisely who abjured it. None of the novels' heroines is seen after her marriage, though Mrs. Weston, Emma's former governess, is present during the first year following hers, and true to her time, has a baby before the year is over.

The parents of the six heroines are an unattractive group as a whole: an exception, Mrs. Morland, while sensible and kind-hearted, is worn out with the care of her large family; the Bennets have been described earlier as mismatched; the Prices are Jane Austen's one attempt to portray an economically depressed family where the mother cannot cope with either her circumstances or her husband, who in turn has abandoned all pretext of responsibility; Mr. Dashwood, Mrs. Woodhouse, and Lady Elliot have died before the events of the novels begin. None of them is remembered as having been particularly happy and their surviving spouses are either ineffectual--Mrs. Dashwood and Mr. Woodhouse--or, in the case of Sir Walter Elliot, a snobbish fool who is important to no one but himself. Of the two admirable couples, the Crofts and the Gardiners, the former is childless--which appears to be an advantage for a seagoing couple--and the latter, while stigmatized by Mr. Gardiner being in trade, is redeemed by their kindness and good sense, which even Darcy recognizes. In Jane Austen's view the odds for having a happy fulfilling marriage are poor for people lacking the quality of emotional intelligence (in which the moral life is equated with

intelligence) with which her heroines are favored.[61]

Her life, on the contrary, was fulfilling. If she undertook the search for self-identity of such consuming interest to the young (but not theirs exclusively) today, there is no record of it. Perhaps on the night she changed her mind about marrying Mr. Bigg-Wither, she realized the place she wanted writing to occupy in her life. If so, she had to be patient for seven more years--surely a period to test the strongest determination--before circumstances were sufficiently propitious for her to return to her work with the concentration that was needed. When that time came, she was ready for it. The genius that had been apparent in the precocious girl had matured and was ready to flower quickly.

Earlier it was stated that the single woman had no opportunity for a career at the turn of the eighteenth century, but there was one exception--the woman writer was accepted. Virginia Woolf explained women's success in this field on the grounds of economics--the materials were cheap!

> Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse....The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions.[62]

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[61] Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (New York: Holt, Rinehardt & Winston, 1937), p. 103.

[62] The Death of the Moth (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942), pp. 235-36.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the women authors out-produced men. Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, Mrs. Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth, and Fanny Burney were making money by the sale of their novels with the result that they were looked on as serious writers. As such they verified the truth of Virginia Woolf's statement "Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for."[63] The difference between Jane Austen and her predecessors was that she always expected to be taken seriously in a time when her peers were not accustomed to look on writing as an art. The most successful in the generation preceding Jane Austen --Fanny Burney--did not return to serious writing after the great success of Cecelia, but preferred to enjoy basking in her personal popularity.[64] Jane Austen also enjoyed her success when it came at last, but it was the success of her novels, not of herself as their creator (the novels were published anonymously in her lifetime), that she welcomed. The nature of the pleasure she derived from the reception of her books could be considered analogous (to use her metaphor) to a mother's vicarious pleasure in her children's achievements.

Jane Austen had a very discouraging start with the rejection of First Impressions in 1797 without being read by the publisher to whom it had been offered, and Susan (later retitled Northanger Abbey) bought for publication but not printed at that time. The price paid £10, was an

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[63] A Room, p. 68.

[64] Johnson, p. 69.

indication of the publisher's low opinion of the work as the standard rate for a first novel then was £50.[65] Most disheartening to the author was the fact that it was not published even though it had been advertised as a forthcoming novel in 1804. After such a discouragingly slow start, it is not surprising, but sad nevertheless, to learn that she felt it necessary to put aside "a sum...to meet the expected loss"[66] when she revised Sense and Sensibility for publication in 1811.

It was not until that year, three years after the menage of Austen women had established themselves in the cottage at Chawton that Jane Austen had the pleasure of seeing her first work in print. Sense and Sensibility was immediately successful and the great novels followed in the six remaining years of her life. As a young girl, Jane Austen had entertained the family with her witty burlesques, but the drive to write came from a deep compulsion within her. Throughout her mature years she read her works to family members, but always as the finished product. She was a true professional, asking for the advice of no one,[67] even those closest to her, and she always expected her work to reach a larger public. R. Brimley Johnson summed up her attitude toward her writing as follows:

> The work was not done merely for the pleasure of doing it. It was her life...because genius such as hers demands self-expression and commands a hearing. From the beginning, moreover, no one stopped to marvel that a woman could do so well:

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[65]Steeves, p. 350. [66]Ibid. [67]Lascelles, p. 31.

they judged her as an artist among her peers.[68]

She was fortunate that she wrote at a period when women were respected in this field even if in no other public endeavor. In her last novel, Persuasion, the influence of changing social attitudes is apparent. The independent Elinor, Elizabeth, Fanny and Emma have been supplanted by the sumissive Anne. Victorian standards were encroaching and with them the loss of status for women. The great women novelists of the next generation, Mary Anne Evans, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, felt it necessary to adopt men's pseudonyms in order to have their work considered seriously. Not so Jane Austen, whose choice of anonymity arose from her deeply felt need to preserve her privacy. Her work was recognized immediately by Sir Walter Scott, the most popular writer of the day, in his perceptive review of Emma, which naturally pleased Jane Austen. The popular notion that a writer is not affected by criticism has been contradicted by Virginia Woolf who said that geniuses, far from not caring what is said of them, because of their intense sensitivity, do, in fact, care the most.[69] Jane Austen bore out this dictum, for she cared so much that following the publication of Emma she kept a list of individual critical opinions of her friends.[70]

If Jane Austen reached the desired goal for which all thoughtful people strive, realization of one's identity

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[68] p. 70 [69] A Room, p. 58 [70] Jenkins, p. 331.

through self-fulfilling work, her success was not unqualified. Recognition and critical acclaim were satisfying, but Jane Austen felt the lack of one essential ingredient to her happiness--money. "Though I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls Pewter too."[71] In the course of her lifetime she was paid only £670 for her writing[72] and remained dependent on her brothers which made her feel a burden to them. When visiting Henry in London in 1813, already the successful author of two published novels, with a third nearly finished, she was enabled to go shopping only on receipt of a gift of £5 from Edward. This position of dependence, if it did not gall Jane Austen, would certainly be offensive to a successful woman of thirty-eight today. The status of woman has indeed improved in the last century and a half with the opening of increasing opportunities for self-fulfillment that Jane Austen could not have foreseen. The goal, however, of commensurate financial reward has not been achieved, and remains the issue on which the women's rights movement receives its widest support. Were Jane Austen living today, this goal is one which would have received her wholehearted endorsement.

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[71]Ibid., p. 249.

[72]Chapman, p. 156n.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When Jane Austen died in 1817, she was only forty-one years old. To declare unequivocally that had she lived she would have changed her manner of living, her thinking, or her writing, in one specific way or another is to hypothesize. However in looking back over her life and writing career, certain lines of development may be discerned and some unchanging principles noted on which it seems reasonable to base a projection of her thought concerning women's position in society today. That she would have been vitally interested must be acknowledged first. In her novels she focused primarily on the problems of women, treating them with a depth that indicated her serious concern.

Although her standards of taste, morality, and decorum were based on eighteenth-century modes, Jane Austen was not a defender of the status quo per se. To her, conventions formed a framework within which the individual could develop with greater freedom than would be possible otherwise. Her heroines recognize this as well, for even Elizabeth Bennet, who flouts convention in minor ways (by tramping alone about the countryside), never considers

risking her place in society by defying its codes.[1]

Jane Austen did not believe that true social harmony was achieved through empty adherence to its forms. It must rest upon sincerity, consideration, reason, and esteem, not on outward conformity alone. Mrs. Elton (in Pride and Prejudice) in her insistence that others accord her the precedence due her, shows, thereby, her vulgarity; Elizabeth Elliott (in Persuasion) shows her snobbery by her pursuit of the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple no less than Mr. Collins in his fawning deference to Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The latter is the character of the highest social rank in the novels--her father was an earl--but her status does not exempt her from Jane Austen's satire.

Acceptance of the idea of rank in society may offend the modern reader, but it can be justified from Jane Austen's point of view in that it was an integral part of the only society she knew. Those characters described above, however, who stressed it preeminently were all treated with asperity. Differences in rank posed no insurmountable barrier to either Elizabeth Bennet or Darcy when they decided to marry, for they had proved they were reasonable adults ready to exercise their prerogatives of individuality and choice.[2] Elizabeth had no qualms about her ability to perform the duties requisite to the mistress of Pemberley, and Darcy was perfectly conscious that while his social rank was above Elizabeth's, his relations

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[1]Mudrick, p. 95.

[2]Pinion, p. 142.

were no more estimable; his aunt, Lady Catherine, is Mrs. Bennet's equal in lack of refinement. There is an intrinsic value in some form of hierarchy, however, serving as it does as another stablizing factor in society. Jane Austen believed in any civilizing force that would contain people within bounds--not to the extent of the coercion of tyranny--but because, in seeing human beings so clearly with "her lucid knife-edged mind,"[3] she was aware of their propensities to act unreasonably, thereby threatening the destruction of the fabric of society and the opportunity for self-fulfillment through their excesses.

Jane Austen stressed decorum only because she was practical; it was a vehicle which society had found useful in promoting harmony. If there were certain rules which members of a group or class had found effective in promoting agreeable social intercourse, a reasonable person would naturally adopt them. It is analogous to a game, when if everyone knows the rules and plays by them, all players benefit. It is the uninitiated--Catherine Morland, or the one who deliberately breaks the rules, Marianne Dashwood--who cause all to suffer. Education is the means of introducing the young to the game, thus assuring its harmonious continuation. Until they have mastered the rules and techniques they make older players uncomfortable, but their lack of finesse is indulged. It is the player who has <u>expertise</u> but defies the regulations who is held

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[3]Cecil, p. 24.

accountable not only for his actions, but for the pain he causes others. Maria Bertram wants both the prestige conferred by being mistress of Sothern and the excitement of Henry Crawford as a lover, but she is unreasonable in trying to have both.

It is the development of the individual woman that is of prime concern to both Jane Austen and women's liberationists today. Changing conditions of life have led to greater expectations on the part of women today. In Jane Austen's time society suffered from the loss of women's contribution because of conditions beyond its control. Medical science had not progressed to the point where women were safe in childbirth, nor was it possible to control the size of families. Thus forces of nature limited women's opportunities in ways that do not apply today. The chances for expanding their roles that these changes make possible form the basis for today's feminist movement, for with new opportunities have come rising demands. The women of the early nineteenth century--Jane Austen was no more realistic than her peers in this respect--accepted their position because there was no feasible way of altering it. Thus science has paved the way for the revolution that Mary Wollstonecraft saw only as a remote vision.

One of the secondary effects of the new dignity which the movement seeks for all women is improvement in the status of the single woman whose position was formerly so deplorable that almost any marriage seemed preferable to

spinsterhood. Jane Austen as the artist would have appreciated this change more than most, for she would have welcomed the independence that living on her own earnings would have brought. She felt keenly that she was a burden to her brothers and in her novels portrayed the desperate plight of the single woman in Jane Fairfax (in Emma) and Mrs. Smith (in Persuasion). She would have concurred with Virginia Woolf who saw the relationship between money, creativity, and women thus:

> Money stands for the power to contemplate; a lock on the door means the power to think for one's self, [Jane Austen had only a squeaking door-hinge to warn her of impending interruption.] ...intellectual freedom depends upon material things...and women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves.[4]

Jane Austen's young women have been criticized for their mercenary view of marriage but economic pressures forced them into such attitudes. With no way to support themselves, it was essential that they find husbands who could. In her desperation to avoid the poverty of spinsterhood, Charlotte Lucas accepted the only man who presented himself. The goal of the feminist movement--assurance for women of the opportunity for self-support--would surely have won Jane Austen's approval today for it would remove the necessity for sacrifices such as Charlotte's.

Neither Jane Austen nor today's feminists seek a

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[4] A Room, p. 110.

position for women in society that is superior to men's. Both recognize, as did Mr. Bennet,[5] that harmony is best assured among equals. He and Mr. Palmer (in Sense and Sensibility) had to endure marriages to women as unequal to them in understanding and intelligence as Mr. Collins was to Charlotte. "His temper [Mr. Palmer's] might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of his sex...he was the husband of a very silly woman."[6]

Another aspect of twentieth-century life that might have made life more tolerable for the ill-assorted couples in Jane Austen's novels is divorce. Even though divorce is disruptive, a reasonable person such as Jane Austen must recognize that an unhappy marriage may result in greater discord than divorce. Mr. Palmer would undoubtedly have welcomed release from the marriage that his mother-in-law Mrs. Jennings and his wife Charlotte taunt him about in this way:

> "You have taken Charlotte off my hands, and cannot give her back again. So there I have the whip hand of you."
> "Charlotte laughed heartily to think that her husband could not get rid of her; and exultingly said, she did not care how cross he was to her, as they must live together.[7]

Thus Jane Austen underscores the lifelong unhappiness and frustration resulting from marriages between unequals.

Even an admirable young girl's disposition may be similarly affected by the limitations imposed by her

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[5]See Chap. 3, p. 64.

[6]Vol. 1, p. 110.

[7]Ibid., p. 112.

society. The frustrations of her life at Longbourn were wearing on Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen's most independent heroine, causing her to be "petulant and acrimonious," for she had no outlet for her "sexual, social and intellectual frustrations [until] her love for Darcy bloomed."[8]

What both Jane Austen and modern feminists have in common is the desire for a society which does not force half its members to dissemble in order to win the admiration of the other half. Falsity in all forms was anathema to Jane Austen so she would have concurred with liberationists whose objective is for a woman to be herself. Through irony thinly disguised by humor, the author comments in Northanger Abbey, "A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can."[9]

It is doubly ironic that the woman who stated this found she could best preserve her own integrity by following this advice, at least in public. While attitudes have changed in the past two hundred years as women have proved themselves capable in a wide range of fields hitherto occupied exclusively by men, the gifted woman, in general, is still suspect in a male-dominated society. And yet she does not want to be outside her society which was one reason Jane Austen was careful to maintain her anonymity. Wright has said "For her the humanization of the individual can only be accomplished by integration into

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[8]Liddell, p. 44.

[9]Vol. 5, p. 111.

the social unit."[10] Thus Jane Austen chose to remain the family member and the neighborhood friend rather than be a celebrated author and Elizabeth Bennet happily found her place as Darcy's devoted wife rather than becoming an eccentric rebel ostracized by society.

Mudrick stressed the need that Jane Austen felt for a means of expressing her critical view of society while safely maintaining her position as a member of it. Her standards were high; she recognized human weakness and the injustices wrought by society, and by individuals upon one another; but her solution was not to seek radical change through attacking institutions. George Henry Lewes recognized Jane Austen's posture in his essay, "The Lady Novelists" (1852), "There is nothing of the doctrinaire in Jane Austen; not a trace of woman's 'mission'; but as the most truthful, charming, humorous, pure-minded, quick-witted, and unexaggerated of writers, female literature has reason to be proud of her."

A century of criticism has found no cause to challenge Lewes' assessment of the absence of the "doctrinaire" in Jane Austen, but the tone of condescension in his last phrase would not go unnoticed today.

Would Jane Austen have felt less pressure to retire behind her mask of irony had she lived in a time when women

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[10]"A Reply to Mr. Burchell on Jane Austen," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 10 (1956): 31.

[11]The Westminster Review, quoted in Elaine Showalter, ed., Women's Liberation and Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 197-), p. 177.

were freer to speak out, to criticize directly instead of obliquely? If her ironic view were an integral part of her personality, as Steeves thinks--he calls "the flow of her ironic genius implicit in and inseparable from her personality"[12]--then could she have changed? It seems that if she could change in such a basic way, she would have been an entirely different person and not the author of the works we know her by today. Virginia Woolf's description of the change in her own personality which the receipt of an inheritance effected is significant in the light of the limitations under which Jane Austen labored all her life, limitations imposed by her dependent position.

> No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house, and clothing are mine forever. Therefore, not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me.[13]

Similarly money, or the security that it brings, might have softened Jane Austen's outlook on society, but this is speculation.

It is safe to say, however, that she would find a wide field on which to exercise her "ironic genius" today if she so chose. Surely the second half of the twentieth century suffers no paucity of "Heroes, Legislators, Fools and Villains;"[14] rather it abounds in examples sufficient to

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[12] p. 362

[13] A Room, p. 38

[14] Jane Austen, Letter 130, quoted in Chapman, p. 70.

provide material even for a reincarnated Jane Austen. The major difference would be that she would not need to limit her sources to country villages, but might find worthy subjects among the more militant women's liberationists themselves. Lest this line of hypothesis get out of hand, it would be well to return to Jane Austen herself and her novels, remembering that comedy was her forte and though she at times trod close to the verge of tragedy, her heroines married happily, thus symbolizing their creator's belief in the reaffirmation of life. The reader is assured that from the union of two admirable characters, who hold each other in mutual esteem, will follow fulfillment and new life.

Would a different century and climate of thought have led the heroines of Jane Austen's novels to seek fulfillment outside convention? It is hard to envisage Jane Austen flouting rules of society which had proved useful in providing forms enabling people to live with a degree of harmony. One must acknowledge that she accepted, perhaps unnecessarily, the narrow limits of her society throughout most of her life, but in the last years her world was enlarging; she was becoming aware of new possibilities of relationships and feelings between individuals. Because, as Kettle says, "She examines with a scrupulous yet passionate and critical precision the actual problems of her world."[15] so must we conclude that she would con-

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[15]p. 118.

tinue her analysis in today's world. If her heroines may be criticized for their lack of passion,[16] Jane Austen herself is not deficient in that respect, though her concern is not with romantic, but with moral passion. Its outlet lay in the intensity with which she was concerned "with the fate of women in her society, a concern which involves a reconsideration of its basic values."[17] She made no pretense of having the answers to all its problems, but she faced them forthrightly both in her own life and in her fictional characters'. The individual as a member of society, working out harmonious relationships in order to bring happiness to others and indirectly to himself, was the center of her attention. Because she believed that excesses of all kinds resulted in discord, they were wrong. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the excesses of the radical branch of the women's movement would be condemned by Jane Austen today. She recognizes unerringly the dissembler, the snob, and the fool, but she chose not to engage in direct attack. Her method was more subtle; her weapon was comic irony; her voice was quiet. She did not spare her victims, nonetheless; rather, they condemned themselves through their own words and actions.

The highest goals of the women's movement and its sincerely motivated proponents would undoubtedly have received Jane Austen's support. She not only showed up the weaknesses of individuals; through satire and irony she emphasized the faults of the society which allowed

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[17]Kettle, p. 122.

(or preferred) women to be uneducated. A conversation between Bingley and Darcy illustrates this:

> "It is amazing to me," said Bingley, "how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished, as they all are."
>
> "All young ladies accomplished! My dear Charles, what do you mean?"
>
> "Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover skreens and net purses."
>
> "Your list of the common extant of accomplishments," Darcy said, "has too much truth."[18]

Jane Austen wanted everyone to have the opportunity to develop the potential for good with in him, but she was too realistic to think everyone would utilize his opportunity. An imperfect society of rules and custom was to be preferred to the anarchy of complete individualism. Militant feminists today, out of perhaps justifiable frustration at the slow pace of progress toward equality, have advocated measures which appear to conservatives to threaten the destruction of society rather than effect its reform. It is these measures, not the spirit that prompted them, with which Jane Austen would have taken issue.

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[18]Vol. 2, Pride and Prejudice, p. 39.

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