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Social Jane: The Sociology of Jane Austen

Description
This chapter is part of a book-length project of six chapters called Social Jane. It sets the political and social context of Jane Austen's novels, and argues for her sociology in two directions. First, it takes trouble to set the social and historical context for her work. Second, it pays attention to her sociological analysis of social forms, and in particular, her brilliant exposé of the intricacies of social hierarchy. Finally, it resolves the question of Austen's own position in the social hierarchy.

Keywords
Jane Austen, social history.

Disciplines
Sociology

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Social Jane
The sociology of Jane Austen.

Christopher Wilkes
Introduction.

Reading Austen Reading Society.

Although Jane Austen’s reputation has been secure since the mid-nineteenth century, she has remained one of the great anomalies of literary history. If few authors have occupied such an honored position in the ranks of great literature, just as few have inspired such divergent accounts of what exactly they are doing in the first place. Accordingly, Austen has appeared to us in a number of contradictory guises - as a cameoist oblivious to her times, or a stern propagandist on behalf of a beleaguered ruling class; as a self-effacing good aunt, or a nasty old maid; as a subtly discriminating stylist, or a homely songbird, unconscious of her art. (Davidson, 1988: xiii-xiv)\(^1\)

In what follows I want to add to these prodigious, but contradictory, claims. I want to argue that Jane Austen’s writing provides an extraordinarily discerning sociology of her period and her social context. And, specifically, I will want to suggest that she wrote one of the most subtle accounts of social hierarchy, social order and social struggle of her time.

Pierre Bourdieu once said of Erving Goffman that he wrote a sociology of the infinitely small.\(^2\) Jane Austen’s world may well be smaller. Goffman wrote of social institutions and social settings, Austen almost always of domestic life, and, even more intimately, of our interior thoughts and feelings about that domestic life. Read this way, her work offers a singular contribution to the understanding of the social world in which she lived. Here is Austen on the judgment of social hierarchy in Emma. Miss Woodhouse is talking of the marriage of Mr. Elton, the local clergyman, to a neophyte, a ‘Miss Hawkins’, who is about to join the Highbury community:

> Of the lady, individually, Emma thought very little. She was good enough for Mr. Elton, no doubt; accomplished enough for Highbury - handsome enough - to look plain … As to connection, there Emma was perfectly easy … What she was, must be uncertain; but who she was, might be found out. She brought no name, no blood, no alliance. Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant, of course, he must be called; but as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate … all the grandeur of the connection seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was very well married, to a gentleman in a great way near Bristol, who kept two carriages! That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins. (Emma, 1957: 140-141)\(^3\)

Emma’s intention here is to place Miss Hawkins in a very particular location in the complex rankings of the rural social order which Miss Hawkins is now entering. Like any advanced social analyst, Emma does it by estimating her wealth (10,000 pounds in the funds); her social rank (lowly, from trade, and not wealthy trade at that); her accomplishments (that turn out to be


\(^3\) Emma, 1957, Riverside Press, New, York, with a foreword by Lionel Trilling. My italics in the first and second lines; the remainder appear in the original.
limited) her taste (vulgar and uneducated); and her connections in society\(^4\) (non-existent among people that matter). Through this mechanism, Emma is able to assign the new arrival to the role of a parvenu on the edge of her own social circle. Austen offers up these kinds of judgments endlessly in everything she writes, and, taken together, these accounts brilliantly reveal the dimensions of what counted as socially correct behavior, and what mattered to the people she wrote about. Knowing this, we are much better able to make sense of how people operated, how they orchestrated their lives, why they learnt to play the piano well, or fold a cravat in a certain way, or herd cows, or hold dances. And, of course, these judgments were not trivial; they shaped the social possibilities of those who were judged in a very decisive way.

But none of this might be so interesting if Austen did not make her individuals so self-referential at all times. Her characters are never allowed merely to act, and to have their acts reported. Instead we are continually made privy to their internal reflections on their own actions, and the actions of others. Thus we emerge, at the very least, with a double understanding – an account of the social acts of judgment that fill the lives of these individuals, and the meanings they invest in these goings-on. From this double hermeneutic, we are enabled to see both the appearance of things and the meaning of things. And since these actions are almost entirely social, Austen’s understanding provides nothing less than an advanced self-reflective sociology of her time.

Pierre Bourdieu’s acknowledged master-work Distinction\(^5\) sets out to create an ethnography of France. No such claim can be made of Austen’s work about England. Its literary ambitions mean it has none of the ‘scientific’ pretensions of sociology, however flimsy these sociological claims might be. There’s no evidence that she planned to recreate the story of a nation. Yet Bourdieu’s work in expanding Marx’s familiar tale of economic capital into the realms of the social, political, cultural and symbolic worlds is, in another sense, a precisely parallel enterprise to Austen’s achievement. At its heart, Bourdieu’s theoretical stratagem is perfectly exemplified by Emma’s tale of Miss Hawkins. Faced with a challenge to her own position in a small society in which she presently reigns, Emma uses all her powers to identify the criteria, the forms of capital we might say, by which such a person as Miss Hawkins might be judged. Knowing this, she is able to conclude, and with some certainty, the precise location that this newcomer will achieve in the existing ranking of Highbury society. And so it proves. Yet none of this happens as a matter of individual prejudice and caprice. Instead it requires agency and human endeavor to bring this about, and, for this judgment to have any social power, it must be agreed upon by the social group as a whole. Working out who counts in this small society, how these social judgments are made, and what work is needed to maintain the rules of conduct and the boundaries of social judgment, constitutes a major theme of this book, and all her novels. She is, in short, a specialist in delineating for us a social judgment of the critique of taste\(^6\) in the small, domestic and largely rural, settings she wrote about.

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\(^4\) Bourdieu calls this dimension ‘social capital’.


\(^6\) This is the subtitle of Bourdieu’s book.
Chapter One

The Sociology of Jane Austen: Social, Literary and Political Context.

Introduction

Jane Austen’s narratives are so rich in their depictions of the interior life that it is easy to forget the outer context in which these descriptions are written. But without this context, it’s clearly impossible to make full sense of what she is writing. The novels do not float above the society in which they are written, but, rather, are only to be made intelligible through its analysis. And it is immediately obvious to even the meanest intelligence, as Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster once put it, that she wrote in a literary context of some complexity, and from which she drew many writing conventions and tropes. More than this, the social structure she is accused of defending, an accusation which, as we shall see, is at least incomplete, was rapidly changing at this time, as the foundations of feudal property dissolved, and the rumblings of the new industrial order became increasingly loud. Political change was also in the air, as the seemingly limitless powers of kings and queens were finally questioned in a fundamental way. Power could no longer reside merely in the court, nor just among those who flattered the monarch, and depended on regal patronage.

This was the Regency era, of course. George the Third had come to the throne in 1760, and was to reign, sometimes with some difficulty, well into the nineteenth century, finally dying in 1820, when his reckless son formally took over, just seventeen years before the beginning of Victoria’s prodigious period of sovereignty. Austen’s era is dominated by a series of social ruptures and disjunctures which can hardly have escaped her notice, and by which she was deeply influenced. The loss of the American colonies was a signal event, indicating as it did, a partial loss to the ‘old foe’, the French, who, as we all know, were deeply ‘complicit’ with the colonists, of course. And these events also represented an equally significant loss of economic power. Indeed, the very notion of regal authority itself was at stake, as the new forms of wealth emerged from the industrial revolution taking place in the cities. It is commonly believed that Austen, while living all her life close to London, never visited it. Nonetheless it can hardly be imagined that she was indifferent to its influence, nor the way in which the very shape of her beloved England was being altered. The Tories, a party grouping which she is said to have supported, was in decline. Under the management of William Pitt the Younger, the 24-year-old Prime Ministerial ‘phenomenon’, the old landed régime held on for some years. But the traditional mode of making money, in which land, peasants and landowners combined to form the majority of the national wealth, was in decline. In its place, William Blake’s ‘dark, satanic mills’ were forming, and wealth was being ground out of the factory system, wealth in previously unimaginable quantities. An entirely new mode of economic production was coming fully into being, and its dominance could not be avoided. And this meant that the familiar place of the landed gentry, a social class to which Austen was attached, both by temperament and tradition,

\footnote{Part of this period is brilliantly depicted by Nigel Hawthorne (George the Third) and Rupert Everett (The Prince Regent) in the film *The Madness of King George*. Helen Mirren plays ‘Mrs. King.’ (*The Madness of King George*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, from play by Alan Bennett, and starring Helen Merrin, Nigel Hawthorne and Rubert Everett, Goldwyn Company, 1994) If the film is to be believed, George the Third suffered from porphyria, a disease of the renal and urinary system, which turns the urine blue, and which can invoke temporary bouts of madness. It is during this period that the Prince Regent and his Whig supporters had their fullest influence.}
was being upturned. It was unclear what would emerge in its place.

At the same time, Britain was exerting its international influence. Long a global power, though hardly in the way we now conceive of globalization, Britain now faced Napoleon and social revolution just across the channel. The loss of aristocratic heads in Paris was dramatically depicted in British cartoons and writings of this time, and the events could hardly have been more shocking to the British aristocracy, or more welcome to radical elements among the emerging British working class. The Navy, about which Austen writes so endurably, was at the center of this engagement, and her two brothers were both admirals of the fleet. And it is the Navy, of course, that in her novels provides one key avenue of advancement to men of little rank and background. Fortunes were made here very quickly, as the tale of Captain Wentworth reminds us. A captain in his thirties could gain a fortune of 30-50,000 pounds in a few years from nautical adventuring, more than enough for a comfortable life of leisure for him and his family for the rest of his days, should he marry.

To establish a foundation from which to assess of Austen’s contribution, therefore, we must consider these themes of social, political and literary context thoroughly. To do so gives us a much better chance of understanding the sensibility that Jane Austen developed in her novels, and allows us to unlock her elaborate sociology.

1. The Complexities of the Social: Economic, Political and Social Shifts in the Age of Revolution.

London, that great broiling entrepôt, is an absence in the Austen novels. It’s always there, of course, yet Austen apparently never traveled there, and her major characters, while migrating through it, and sometimes staying there for some time, never made it their permanent

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8 Extracted from James Gillray’s cartoons displayed on the web at [http://www.napoleonguide.com/gillray1.htm](http://www.napoleonguide.com/gillray1.htm), and retrieved on May 20, 2009.

9 Think of Elinor and Marianne, for example, and their long sojourn with Mrs. Jennings at her London home. Mr. Knightley’s brother, John, lives there, of course. Frank Churchill shows his deep superficiality once and for all with his day trip to London.
residence. But its influence on the surrounding countryside was overwhelming. London, by the end of the 18th Century, had become the largest city in the world.\textsuperscript{10} It is estimated that by 1800, the population had reached 900,000. It superseded Paris, and, not surprisingly, population growth rates were higher in England than in France. But France had a far larger population overall, with almost four times the numbers compared to England at the end of the 1700's.

London embraced a larger percentage of the English population than Paris did of France. London had become far larger than any other English city,\textsuperscript{11} and this had decided implications for the family structure, not to mention the economic, political and social life, of the nation as a whole. Unlike rural communities, where family members often lived close to one another, Londoners were frequently separated from extended familial networks. And, obviously, wealth was accumulated by an entire class of people who had no connection to the land. The very means of production themselves were dramatically changing, and this change centered on the cities.

In Austen’s novels, London may be an absence, but it remains deeply influential on the lives of her characters. Mr. Weston in \textit{Emma} disappears to London on matters of business. Mr. Knightley visits his brother in London. It is \textit{in} London that Wickham and Lydia hide from social approbation in \textit{Pride and Prejudice}. In \textit{Sense and Sensibility}, it is \textit{from} London that the threat to the Dashwood livelihood emanates. And it is \textit{back} in London that Marianne meets her fate with Willoughby, an exchange that nearly costs her her life. London is a darkness, a brooding necessity that one must visit, but then leave for safety’s sake. Retreat, revival and health are only to be found in the countryside.

Nonetheless, London exercised a considerable influence on the country around it. First, it was a substantial food market, and therefore shifted the production systems of rural agriculture. Market gardens, poultry farms and various forms of livestock production were directly tied to London needs, especially in East Anglia and Essex.\textsuperscript{12}

Second, the source of energy for the new society was shifting from wood to coal. Coal was being shipped up the Thames to London in vast quantities from various parts of the country. Woodland that had previously supplied the city was now left to one side. The new coal industry also drove many changes in machinery, manufacturing, and the extractive process, not to mention large-scale shifts in population. This change also had significant consequences for country life. Third, the new system of enclosures was releasing the bonds of countrymen from traditional rural ties, and forcing them to find work elsewhere, usually in the cities.\textsuperscript{13} London was the great magnet and the great threat, both.

\textsuperscript{11} Wrigley, op. cit., page 67.
\textsuperscript{12} Op. Cit., page 71.
\textsuperscript{13} London grew from 900,000 in 1800 to 7,000,000 by 1911. See \textit{An Economic History of London}, Michael Ball and David Sunderland, Routledge, London, 2006.
This was the age of social, as well as economic, transformation. Eric Hobsbawm calls it the ‘Age of Revolution’. And as Edward Thompson tells us in his magisterial *Making of the English Working Class*, an entirely new class of people was being formed. Most crucial to our understanding is that this ‘making’ of the working class was an act of voluntarism, not produced by some imaginary machine of history inevitably rolling forward, but instead from the individual and collective work of thousands and millions of English people over generations. As Thompson comments, between 1780 and 1832:

Most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. This ruling class was itself much divided, and in fact only gained in cohesion over the same years because certain antagonisms were resolved in the face of an insurgent working class. Thus the working class presence was the most significant factor in British political life. (Thompson, 1963:11)

It is this consciousness, not merely the appearance of a new class in a structural sense, but their profound self-understanding that they were a class, that underscores the significance of this change. Thompson has a clear social mission in writing his book. In his famous phrase, he spells this aim out clearly:

‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and event the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. (Thompson, 1963: 12)’

History and consciousness combined in this account to shape the social world of working people in Austen’s time. Huge ruptures in the economic system were associated inevitably by equally dramatic changes in the way people felt about their social world, and by the rise of an entirely new class of people tied closely to industrial production and to cities. As people flooded in to London from the surrounding countryside, but, much more broadly, from all over the world, the change in country life was clearly discernable. This ‘flood of newness’ is hinted at in the discourse on new fashions, for example, in *Northanger Abbey*, which Marilyn Butler has taken to be the novel which best depicts the shape of this emerging culture of consumption that was rapidly developing at this time.

New ideas of a truly revolutionary nature were in the air, ideas which decisively shaped society in this period. The 1790s was the era of the Pitt administrations, in which a series of Acts were invoked that sought to manage these new ideas. The Combination Acts aimed to control the formation of societies and organizations that discussed social reforms. The Seditious Meetings Act of 1799 (titled ‘An Act to Prevent Unlawful Combinations of Working Men’) prevented trade union formation and the process of active bargaining. Its effect was to drive much working class political and social activity underground. The act was repealed in 1824, but replaced the following year by an act that severely curtailed the right of unions and working class organizations. The Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 restricted public meetings to 50 people. Licenses were required from the police for lectures and debates. Thompson relates the story of the London Corresponding Society, a group of...
Act restricted collective assembly in public. By dramatically repressing reform, government ensured that the working class movement disappeared underground, only to re-appear in the 1830’s in fuller force. Of course, there was considerable unrest throughout this period, but much of it was silent on the public stage for obvious reasons. Voting was essentially based on the ownership of property, and many electorates, the so-called ‘rotten boroughs’, were founded on small populations whose support could be bought and sold at will. The 1832 Reform Act enabled large cities to be better represented, but it still limited the franchise to a small number of adult males. Traditionally, many House of Commons constituencies were under the control of landowners.20

The fear of ‘Jacobinism’ was very real among English élites. The French Revolution had thrown into the air ideas that gave rise to great distress among the ruling interests in England of the time. It was not enough that radical elements of the French Revolutionary movement were beheading French nobles, their wives and their entourages. Even more troubling to established interests in England was the flood of new thinking about political representation, political power and the need to upturn old established practices of control by landed interests. The Jacobins in France were associated with the so-called ‘reign of terror’ during 1793 and 1794, during which at least 16,000, and perhaps as many as 40,000 counter-revolutionaries, mostly from the landed classes, were beheaded. Widespread hunger and starvation, along with an extraordinarily indifferent ruling class, conspicuous for their consumption, were elements behind this movement. And while the ruling categories in England could point to a more benevolent régime in their own land, there were many rumblings among ordinary people on the northern side of the channel that the Jacobins were not entirely mistaken.

Jacobinist clubs, widely organized in France as instruments of social reform, soon started to emerge in London. In France, while they were first known as moderate political organizations, they soon became implicated in the worst excesses of revolutionary violence. At their peak, French membership stood at over 400,000 people.

In London, the term ‘Jacobin’ soon became synonymous with any interests spreading ideas about political reform. These reforms came to fruition after 1830, with the passing of the Poor Law, the reform of Parliament, and the gradual extension of the franchise over almost a century.

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20 This situation was widely written about in the novels of 19th century, among which the Palliser novels of Anthony Trollope are illustrative. Between 1864 and 1879, Trollope wrote six novels that came to be called the Palliser novels, and which depict the political and social life of Plantaganet Palliser, and his wife Lady Glencora Palliser. In an attempt to chaperone a protégé into such a ‘safe seat’, Lady Glencora gets herself, and the man in question, into a great deal of hot water. In such cases, the word of the local landlord was often sufficient to secure the nomination for a seat, and this nomination was often unchallenged, once the wishes of the local landowner were made known. But this was a subtle process in some instances. It was not seemly to have this wish directly implemented as a matter of raw power. Rather, given that the political and economic interest of the whole community were closely tied to those of the ‘big house’, it often became known in indirect ways what kind of person would suit. In some instances, large landowners controlled more than one seat. It was claimed that the Duke of Norfolk possessed eleven, and the Earl of Lonsdale nine. The significance of the ‘big house’ is, of course, everywhere in Austen’s writings. Perhaps it is most clear in Pride and Prejudice, when Bingley suddenly leaves the neighborhood for London, leaving a substantial gap in the economic life of the village. But the importance of Pemberley, not to mention Kellynch, in their respective locales, should not be overlooked. They were hubs of economic power for rural areas, and thus the economic wellbeing of entire communities were often at the whim of a landowner’s preference.
But these reforms had begun in Austen’s time, and certainly by 1780.21 This was an era of extreme conditions for working people. Roach comments:

From the problem of poverty every other social concern branched out, because every other social evil seemed to the men (sic.) of the time to be either the cause or the result of it, and sometimes both cause and effect at once. It was both a rural and an urban problem … (Roach, op. cit.:16)

It is hard to argue with this thesis. Reformers uniformly wanted to refashion the working class in a ‘better direction’. (Roach, 17) Factory work was praised because it brought discipline to a previously undisciplined mass. The tyranny of the clock, a topic that Edward Thompson widely investigated, was heralded by the reform-minded because it regulated and managed the disordered. School reform was authoritarian. So while freedom from poverty was sought, it was a freedom to be fashioned by discipline and compulsion.

Roach argues that ‘A reforming society is necessarily a more closely regulated society’, (Roach, 18) and that this regulation was a defensive move by ruling interests to secure a stable social environment. (op. cit.) Roach is not the only one to suggest that a genuine possibility of revolution was both feared and hoped for at this time. The lack of a regular police force, and the misery of the life of common people were both factors that enhanced the probabilities of social unrest:

‘Schools of Jacobinical politics abound in this country’, said Bishop Horseley of Rochester in his charge to the clergy of his diocese in 1800, ‘In them the minds of the lower orders are taught to despise religion and the laws of subordination’. (Roach, 19)

The educated and enlightened middle class of this era were alarmed by these problems that threatened to overwhelm the social order. Coupled with everything else, an increase in population and the rise of towns threatened to swamp England’s capacity as a nation to secure prosperity for all its people:

In 1751, there were perhaps 7¼ million people in Great Britain. At the first census in 1801, there were 10,943,000, a total which in 1831 had grown to 16,359,000 … (Roach, 24)

This was the era of the Malthus-inspired anxiety that there would not be enough food for this vastly-expanding population. Disaster was therefore inevitable, in this view, and especially for the lower classes. As Malthus famously put it:

Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometric ratio. Subsistence increases on in an arithmetic ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison to the second. (Malthus, 1798, page 71, cited in Roach, 55)22

Roach provides us with a nuanced account of the Malthusian proposal, and warns us that things were not quite as dire as they first seemed in this early Malthusian account. As Roach tells it,

Malthus is attacking the idea that society is perfectible.\textsuperscript{23} His brilliant writing, and the mathematical certainty of his formulations, meant his ideas, and usually the most superficial readings of them, had great influence. So that, even if these trends were not inevitable in the end, the fear of them ranked very high in the minds of the Regency generation. The important conclusion to be drawn from this work was that, while England might have witnessed an increase in wealth, that wealth was mostly centered on the cities, and not in making agriculture more productive, so that more food could be produced.\textsuperscript{24} Malthus held the view that the ‘prudential restraint of marriage’\textsuperscript{25} might do the trick in preventing unrestrained growth of population. In this way, the labouring classes might receive a larger share of the national wealth, and their futures would be secured. Civil liberties and democracy were therefore valuable because they were qualities that allowed a doctrine of self-reliance to develop, which would, in turn, finally ease the problems of the lower orders.\textsuperscript{26} But the fear elite ordered life being overwhelmed by the vast urban masses remained. It was a fear that was felt most decidedly in the world that Austen depicts, an uncertain fear tied up with the rise of London, the new industries, and the reshaping of the social world.

While this new working world was tumbling into being, complete with new occupations, new manufactures, and new social rankings, things were more settled, at least on the surface, on the other side of the class divide, among the peerage and the landed gentry. Peers, of course, were nobles of the realm, receiving titles either in their own name, or through the male line, traditionally from the monarch. In most cases, these titles came with land, and through land, with income. There were five noble titles. A dukedom was the most distinguished of these five, followed, in descending order, by the titles of Marquess (Marquis in France and Scotland), Earl, Viscount, and finally, Baron.

A Dukedom conferred rank of the highest order, and suggested proximity to the monarch.\textsuperscript{27} The rank originated from the Latin term \textit{dux}, which meant military leader, and was first given to close blood relatives of the monarch, thus ensuring, at least in theory, strict loyalty. Like all such ranks, the awarding of a Dukedom came increasingly under the control of Parliament by Austen’s time, and the monarchical monopoly was rescinded. Today, such title are governmental prerogatives, to which the Monarch ‘consents’. There were never more that about 40 Dukedoms at any one time. Often they were the final social rewards for the landed nobility, but these honours were sometimes associated with military achievements, as tradition had first proposed, as in the cases of the Dukes of Marlborough and Wellington, for example.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{23} Roach, op. cit., page 55.
\textsuperscript{24} Roach, op. cit., page 56.
\textsuperscript{25} Roach, 56.
\textsuperscript{26} Roach, 58-59.
\textsuperscript{27} This section rests partly on material from Burke’s Peerage, at www.burkespeerage.net/articles/peerage.aspx.
\textsuperscript{28} The first Duke of Marlborough was John Churchill, (1650-1722) who led the victory of the British at Blenheim in 1704. It was a major event during the Spanish war of succession. The Duke of Marlborough fought on the side of the Grand Alliance to protect Vienna from attack. As a result of this triumph, the Alliance against the French was secured, and French domination of Europe avoided. Marlborough was heralded as a national hero on his return to London. He had already been granted a Dukedom in 1702 by Queen Anne. He was further rewarded in 1705 by a gift of £240,000 to build a suitable house – Blenheim Palace. Blenheim Palace remains the only British residence called a ‘Palace’ which is not owned by the Crown. The Duke of Marlborough still lives there.

The Duke of Wellington received his title during Austen’s lifetime, of course. Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852) was first Duke of Wellington, appointed by George the Third in 1814. It is the most senior of the Dukedoms. Wellington was widely recognized at the ‘Hero of Waterloo’, another battle in which the historic foe, the French, were defeated, and a significant turning-point in
The rank of Marquess (Marquis in Scotland and France) ranked second behind a Dukedom. It derived its name from the term *march* which relates to a border area which would often be protected by a custodian of high rank, from which the status derives. More generally, it referred to a governor of a region. The title is often associated with a place name. The wife of a Marquess has the title of Marchioness. One of the most familiar persons to hold this rank is the Marquess of Queensbury, the founder of the rules of boxing.\(^{29}\) In Austen’s time, the Marquess of Rockingham was a significant figure. He became Prime Minister in 1765. He has succeeded to the leadership of the Whig Party at an nearly age on an anti-corruption ticket. His government repealed the Stamp Act in February, 1766, which had caused so much trouble in the American colonies, and he proposed a lenient policy towards England’s American cousins. This was not a popular view, and it did not please George the Third. He was replaced by William Pitt the Elder. In the years following Austen’s death, the Marquess of Salisbury was Prime Minister for almost thirteen years during the reign of Queen of Victoria.

An Earldom is the third of the five ranks of the peerage. The incumbent often had an official role to play, traditionally taking part in the court proceedings of the county under their control and receiving fees from these same courts. It is a rank often given to retired Prime Ministers. The Earl of Liverpool was Prime Minister during Austen’s lifetime. Indeed he was a very prominent figure. He was Prime Minister for almost fourteen years, from 1812 to 1827, on the conservative side of the aisle. He was instrumental in perpetrating many repressive measures against social reformers. Entering Parliament in 1791, early in Austen’s life, he remained there almost until his death. He is known for restoring order during the period of radicalism at the end of the Napoleonic Wars after 1815.\(^{30}\) His government suspending *habeas corpus*\(^{31}\) for two years. The pressure for reform was most intense during the period just after Austen’s death. In an infamous incident recorded in E.P. Thompson’s history\(^{32}\), 1819 saw the massacre of eleven members of a public meeting gathered to discuss reform at an event that came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre. Liverpool’s response was to curtail radical meetings through a series of the long-standing wars against Napoleon. It put an end to Napoleon’s reign as Emperor. The title of Duke of Wellington had a series of ‘subsidiary’ titles attached to it, including the *Marquess of Wellington* (1812), *Marquess Douro* (1814), *Earl of Mornington* (1766), *Earl of Wellington* (1812), *Viscount Wellesley* (1760), *Viscount Wellington* (1809), *Baron Mornington* (1746) and *Baron Douro* (1809). These subsidiary titles could be ‘stripped off’ and used by other family members, with the permission of the Monarch, on certain occasions. Oldest sons of a duke held such titles routinely.

Until the House of Lords Act of 1999, all peers were members of the House of Lords. From that year, however, most hereditary peers were removed from the House through legislation. This had the effect of placing the House of Lords in the hands of those appointed, rather than hereditary peers. The title is often associated with a place name. The wife of a Marquess has the title of Marchioness. One of the most familiar persons to hold this rank is the Marquess of Queensbury, the founder of the rules of boxing.\(^{29}\) In Austen’s time, the Marquess of Rockingham was a significant figure. He became Prime Minister in 1765. He has succeeded to the leadership of the Whig Party at an nearly age on an anti-corruption ticket. His government repealed the Stamp Act in February, 1766, which had caused so much trouble in the American colonies, and he proposed a lenient policy towards England’s American cousins. This was not a popular view, and it did not please George the Third. He was replaced by William Pitt the Elder. In the years following Austen’s death, the Marquess of Salisbury was Prime Minister for almost thirteen years during the reign of Queen of Victoria.

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\(^{29}\) The Marquess of Queensbury did not write the rules, but he did endorse them, and they thus were named for him. John Graham Chambers wrote them in 1865, and they were published as the ‘Queensbury Rules’ in 1867, a process that points once again to the importance of sponsorship and the power to ‘name’ among the nobility.

\(^{30}\) See the United Kingdom Government’s website at www.number10.gov.uk/history-and-tour/prime-ministers-in-history/earl-of-liverpool

\(^{31}\) *Habeas Corpus* is a legal action through which an individual can seek respite from unlawful detention. It thus provides protection from illegal state action, and has historically acted as a bulwark against arbitrary state power. The consequence of its existence is that a prisoner must be brought to court to ensure that the authorities have the power to hold that individual. If this case is not proven, then the prisoner must be released. A writ of habeas corpus from a judge releases the prisoner. Thus the recent detentions by the Bush government in the United States have sometimes come up against this demand, and debate has raged about the role of habeas corpus as a defence against the modern state. In October 2006, President Bush suspended habeas corpus for enemy combatants. A law professor commented: “What, really, a time of shame this is for the American system. What the Congress did and what the president signed today essentially revokes over 200 years of American principles and values.” (Jonathan Turley, cited at usgovinfo.about.com/od/rightsandfreedoms/a/habeuscorpus.htm.)

legislative moves called the ‘Six Acts’. This repression led to attacks on Liverpool himself by radicals, and plans to start a revolution. This conspiracy, known as the Cato conspiracy, did not succeed, and its perpetrators were hung or transported. Liverpool became more liberal as years passed, and economic prosperity improved.

Fourth in line was the rank of Viscount. Traditionally it meant a shire-keeper) which in turn implied that the incumbent had administrative responsibility for a county under the control of an Earl. The rank has its origins in the 15th century. Most famous among viscounts in Jane Austen’s time was Admiral Samuel Hood, renowned for his involvement in the American Revolutionary War and the naval engagements with Napoleon. His history would have been well known to her as she wrote her novels. He was a mentor to the famous Admiral Horatio Nelson of Battle of Trafalgar (1805) fame, during which Nelson died in an episode which became iconic in British history as a moment of heroism and right feeling. Hood entered the Navy in 1741, and was to remain there most of his life. In 1793, he was sent to the Mediterranean as Commander-in-Chief. His wife was made Baroness Hood of Catherington in 1795, and he was made Viscount Hood in the following year.

Finally, the lowest ranking in the peerage is the Barony. William the First instigated the rank to denote those who were loyal to him. In the early days of the medieval period, a Baron was simply an individual who received land from the sovereign. Military service to the King often resulted in land and a Barony. But a Barony could also be established by other means. People other than the monarch could give away land and create the rank. A writ could be drawn by the monarch to draw people of wealth and competence to parliament. The position was later created by letters patent, the express wish of the Crown. In this case, the position was not dependent on land, but merely represented the wishes of the monarch. As with the other ranks, this title came more and more under the control of parliament by Austen’s time, and lost its royal monopoly.

Earl Grey tea has its origins in a barony of Jane Austen’s period. The title ‘Earl Grey’ was created in 1806 for the General Charles Grey, the first Baron Grey. And this story is especially instructive because it takes us through the ranks of the peerage in the span of a life history. Earl Grey started as Baron Grey of Howick in 1801, and was later made Viscount Howick, in the County of Northumberland, at the same time as he was given the earldom. He was a reformer, and a prominent Whig politician, who was Prime Minister the from 1830 to 1834, during which time the Reform Act of 1832 was passed. The family title had started ‘even lower’ as a baronetcy in 1746. In turn, this had resulted from a member of the family being High Sheriff of Northumberland in 1738. So we are reminded that these ranks were fluid, and there was often advancement between the ranks, even in a single, and certainly over several, generations.

Earl Grey teas was named after the second Earl Grey, the Prime Minister of the 1830s. It gains its special quality from the addition of oil from the rind of a bergamot orange. Grey was said to have received a gift of such a tea, a black tea flavoured with the citrus oil.

Two further titles were in play during Austen’s time, and both have a role in her novels. A

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33 See the U.K. Goverment website, op.cit.
34 He was considered a great leader of men, and a heroic and patriotic figure of his time. Trafalgar Square in the center of London, and Nelson’s Column, which was built in that square, remain as memorials to his actions.
Baronetcy was not a peerage like the five ranks listed above, but it was inherited. Thus Sir Walter Elliot was a baronet, and his title could be passed down, which provides the plot for the relation between the Baronet and his putative heir, William Walter Elliot. But he was a commoner, and did not sit in the House of Lords. At the bottom of the titled hierarchy came a knighthood. Sir William Lucas, Austen tells us, was a merchant who became a mayor, and then received a title because of his mayoral status. It was not hereditary, and did not come with land. But it was the first step on the rankings that meant so much in Austen’s day. Austen says of Sir William:

Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. It had given him a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town; and quitting them both, he had removed with his family to a house about a mile from Meryton, denominated from that period Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance, and, unshackled by business, occupy himself solely in being civil to all the world. For though elated by his rank, it did not render him supercilious; on the contrary, he was all attention to every body. By nature inoffensive, friendly and obliging, his presentation at St. James’s had made him courteous.

Lady Lucas was a very good kind of woman, not too clever to be a valuable neighbour to Mrs. Bennet. -- They had several children. The eldest of them, a sensible, intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven, was Elizabeth’s intimate friend. (Pride and Prejudice, 18)

Austen rarely wrote about the nobility, and was not herself part of that world, of course. Darcy may be the richest man in Derbyshire, but he is not a noble, and he, in turn, is not impressed by the country habits of Sir William Lucas, who, while well-intentioned, has none of the grace and presence (not to say the land) of a noble family. In Persuasion, Sir Walter Elliot is a Baronet, but it’s clear who has the upper hand when the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple comes on the scene in Bath. As the widow of a Viscount, she is part of the nobility itself, and expects and receives full deference from all who rank below her, which is most of polite society. Sir Walter, ever alert to the boundaries of rank, cannot wait to pay his closest attentions to her:

Sir Walter had once been in the company of the late Viscount, but had never seen any of the rest of the family; and the difficulties of the case arose from there having been a suspension of all intercourse by letters of ceremony, ever since the death of that said late viscount, when, in consequence of a dangerous illness of Sir Walter’s at the same time, there had been an unlucky omission at Kellynch. No letter of condolence had been sent to Ireland. The neglect had been visited on the head of the sinner; for when poor Lady Elliot died herself, no letter of condolence was received at Kellynch, and, consequently, there was but too much reason to apprehend that the Dalrymples considered

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35 William Walter Elliot Esq. is described variously as the ‘Heir presumptive, William Walter Elliot, Esq., great grandson of the second Sir Walter’, (Persuasion, page 4) and the possible husband of Sir Walter’s oldest daughter, Elizabeth. ‘She had a disappointment, moreover, which that book, (The Baronetcy) and especially the history of her own family, must ever present the remembrance of. The heir presumptive, the very William Walter Elliot, Esq. whose rights had been so generously supported by her father, had disappointed her’. (Persuasion, 7) As well, he is mentioned as the cousin of Mary, Elizabeth and Anne. (Persuasion, 105-106.)

36 Burke’s Peerage tells us: ‘This title is unique to the kingdoms of the British Isles that since the 17th century have at different times merged to form the United Kingdom. The collective name for baronets is baronetage, though this can also mean a reference book listing holders of baronetcies (e.g., Burke’s Peerage & Baronetage). The order of baronets was invented by JAMES I to raise money.’ From ‘www.burkes-peerage.net/articles/peerage/page66-baronet.aspx’. 
Austen confirms for us the realization that it is not that Sir Walter and his family would receive any direct material advantage from this alliance, but that the chance that they would be ‘cut’, or simply ignored by this family would be an unbearable challenge to their own flimsy authority. It is social approbation and social recognition that is at stake here.

As we shall see in the conclusion of this chapter, it was in neither of these worlds that Austen was an inhabitant, but rather in the middling classes, and mostly the rural middling classes, sometimes called the gentry, that she spent her life. Austen never quite succumbed to complete poverty, though the death of her father provided a real threat to her well-being. Nor was she really at risk of entering the nobility. In between these two extremes, a relentless battle took place for respectability, for position and for security, and it is in this game, at which she was an expert, that she made her reputation as a novelist, a novelist who read voraciously. In the next section, we review this literary environment she wrote within, the better to understand where Austen gained her intellectual influences, before we end by placing her work concretely in both these universes, the world of the social, and the world of literary conventions.

2. Literary Ideas in the World of Jane Austen.\(^{37}\)

In contrast to modern readers and writers, who draw the line between public and private at the threshold of an Englishman’s home and then assign women to that apolitical space within its doors, late-eighteenth-century women read and wrote novels that undertook either to defend the nation from the contagion of “Jacobinism” or to improve the nation by pointing to the need for social reform. Dramatically exploring the philosophical rallying cries invoked on both sides of the debate – the catchwords about liberty, prejudice, reason, sensibility, authority, happiness – the feminine tradition of the novel was, pace Chapman, a “polysyllabic” one, and Austen, a compulsive reader of novels, was thoroughly acquainted with it. (Johnson, op. cit.:xx)

If Johnson is right, then it also seems very important to gain a sense of this ‘feminine literary tradition’ if we are to fully understand Austen’s work. Who, then, were the novelists that most preoccupied Austen as she wrote? Butler, in her discussion of Northanger Abbey, introduces us to this world.\(^{38}\) I use her typification to examine this field. So, following Butler, it is to Frances Burney we must first turn. Burney, with her novel Evelina, \((1778)\) is credited with establishing a new school of fiction in which a realist approach to women in contemporary life is invoked. Its wit, social satire and social realism presage Austen’s own work. Butler refers to this genre as the Richardsonian tradition.\(^{39}\) Fanny Burney wrote, in Evelina, Cecilia and Camilla, of aristocratic

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\(^{37}\) I am drawing extensively on two major sources in this section. First, Marilyn Butler’s celebrated introduction to the Penguin edition of Northanger Abbey (Penguin, London, 1995) is used to provide information on the fundamental influences from other women novelists on Austen’s own writings. Second, Claudia Johnson’s Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988) provides information on the broader intellectual background, and especially the political ideas that Austen may have drawn upon. She also makes a very persuasive case for Austen’s ‘small politics’, a case I find entirely convincing, and with which I concur.

\(^{38}\) Butler, op. cit. xxi.

\(^{39}\) Butler, op. cit. xxi. Samuel Richardson (1689 – 1761) was a writer and printer, best known for three novels Pamela Or, Virtue Rewarded (1740), Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady (1748) and The History of Sir Charles Grandison (1753). He was a friend of Samuel Johnson, and a rival of Henry Fielding, who wrote novels in a similar vein. Fielding, in turn is well-known for his novel Tom Jones, and was a friend of William Pitt the elder.
heroes who succumbed to the charms of women from lesser ranks. There are many parallels between the Burney mode of writing and Austen’s texts. The heroines are very similar – innocents acting as virtuously as possible in a ‘game’40 they have neither the capacity or the experience to understand, and in which they have little chance of success. Even the daily events of the two books, *Camilla* and *Northanger Abbey*, are similar.41 Typical of this genre is the tale of the innocent heroine entering the social world of danger that adult life represents, a cornerstone of the wider Gothic tradition. But Butler claims that this central motif of Gothic literature is also mixed in with the more realistic trends deriving from the Richardson-Burney genre.42 Given that *Northanger Abbey* is a decided parody on the Gothic tradition, this seems plausible, and we are reminded that *Northanger Abbey* is, in the end, a romance, rather than simply a collection of stereotypes and caricatures. Like all Austen’s novels, it is deeply ironic, but it has Burney’s fingerprints all over it.

Austen makes direct reference to three of the Burney novels.43 Over time, and in parallel with Austen, Burney has become, with the publication of her full works44, a celebrated chronicler of her age, starting her account with the inward world of domestic life and personal sentiment, and moving outwards to considerations of broader social and political issues. *Evalina* made Burney’s reputation. Burney herself most admired Swift and Johnson45, and Samuel Johnson was an early mentor and influence. In fact, during her lifetime, Frances Burney was a phenomenon. And unlike Austen, who struggled to get her novels published, and received scant praise and less money for her work during her brief lifetime, Burney wrote with great success and lived a long life. She was born twenty three years before Austen in 1752, and published her first novel, *Evalina*, in 1778, just after Austen was born. When the name of the author was known, the book became a cause célèbre, because of its distinct structure, and its satirical and comedic form. Further novels, *Cecilia* in 1782, *Camilla* in 1796 and *The Wanderer*, which came much later in 1814, added to her reputation. Austen died in 1817, but Burney continued with her writing, and finally died in 1828.46

Betty Rizzo argues that Frances Burney is concerned mostly with meritocracy and with the gentry, real and imagined.47 There are those who like to think they are gentry, people who live in a genteel fashion, but have little land or resources to support their lifestyle.48 And then there are ‘authentic’ gentry who do have land and resources, but no title or distinction of rank. This same

40 It is a ‘game’ of great seriousness, of course.
41 Butler, op cit. xxii.
42 Butler op. cit. xxiii.
45 Jonathan Swift, the Anglo-Irish satirist, is best known for his *Gulliver’s Travels*, and especially as a political satirist who some would claim has no peer in the English language. He started as a Whig propagandist and moved later to the Tory sphere, largely to further Irish causes. *Gulliver’s Travels*, first published in 1726, was a satire commenting on much of his political experience. It was a great hit, and went immediately to three printings. He died in 1745.
48 Rizzo, 132.
group, of course, much concerns Austen, in her depiction of Mr. Knightley, Colonel Brandon, and even Mr. Darcy. Burney celebrated and valued wit, ‘... elegance, delicacy and conversational powers…’. And, in sharp contrast to Austen and her family, the Burney clan were consciously at work advancing their own social standing at all times. Here is Rizzo commenting on Fanny Burney’s introduction to Streatham society:

Burney was introduced at Streatham in July 1778. After her initial trepidation, she found that she did very well there. The society was very much a meritocracy, but one that demanded, beside achievement, (and even better, fame), moderate cultivation, but immoderate wit. (Rizzo, 140)

In contrast to Austen, Burney was constantly in London, and, for a time, was a minor official at court, a role that provided her with regular income, and significant social standing. In her own life, she exhibited the same difficulties as her heroines, people of clear and obvious value, who struggled mightily to have that ‘natural’ and ‘transparent’ value recognized in the social world at large.

While Burney’s life and her success provide a sharp contrast to Austen’s own experience and social circle, their joint preoccupations with social hierarchy and social distinction are also clear. Consider, for example, this passage from Burney’s *Evalina*. Evalina and her friend Mrs. Selwyn are invited to dinner with a ‘Mrs. Beaumont’:

> We found Mrs. Beaumont alone … She is an absolute Court Calendar bigot; for chancing herself to be borne of a noble and ancient family, she thinks proper to be of opinion, that birth and virtue are one and the same thing. She has some good qualities, but they rather originate from pride rather than principle … Fortunately for the world in general, she has taken it into her head, that condescension is the most distinguishing virtue of high life, so that the same pride of family which renders others imperious, is with her the motive of affability. But her civility is too formal to be comfortable, and too mechanical to be flattering. That she does me the honour of so much notice, is merely owing to an accident … I once did her some service … at the time she accepted my assistance, she thought I was a woman of quality: and I make no doubt but she was miserable when she discovered me to be a mere country gentlewoman … I am not much flattered by her civilities, as I am convinced I owe them neither to attachment or gratitude, but solely to a desire of cancelling an obligation which she cannot brook being under, to one whose name is no where to be found in the Court Calendar. (*Evalina*, page 284. Italics in the original)

But *Evalina* also contrasts strongly with the style later adopted by Austen. It takes an epistolary form, focuses on action and speech in a way which is very distinct from Austen’s quieter approach, and has close ties to the vaudevillian tradition of the playhouse and the music-halls.

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49 Rizzo, op. cit., page 134. The Burneys struggled for social success and monetary security, and were very much part of this middling meritocratic stratum of the social hierarchy. As Rizzo comments, ‘they very much lived ‘in the World’ and were proud of their achievements and those of their friends.

50 Rizzo comments that her five years at court ‘withered’ her, and that she failed to learn how to be obsequious and pleasing. (Rizzo, 144)

51 This appears as footnote 1 in the text, and the footnote comments: ‘Court Calendar bigot: That is, a snob, a superstitious adherent of the court almanac or annual hand-book of royal families and their courts.

And there is very little of the rich interior monologues so much admired in Austen’s work. Instead, there is much uproar, travel to London and Paris, action, engagement and excitement, hardly the dominant themes in Austen’s works.

A second influence must be the stories of small business, such as Edgeworth’s The Parent’s Assistant, since Northanger Abbey is frequently read, by Butler and by others, as a meditation on consumerism, and the mad rush of fashion taking place, and represented through the character of Isabella Thorpe. We see the edges of this consumerist semiotic everywhere in Austen, and everywhere, too, it is dismissed for its moral emptiness, and its capacity to waste the limited resources of middling families. In a typical scene from Pride and Prejudice, Lydia explains a brief flirtation with a hat:

It was the second week in May, in which the three young ladies set out together from Gracechurch-street for the town of —— in Hertfordshire; and, as they drew near the appointed inn where Mr. Bennet’s carriage was to meet them, they quickly perceived, in token of the coachman’s punctuality, both Kitty and Lydia looking out of a dining room up stairs. These two girls had been above an hour in the place, happily employed in visiting an opposite milliner, watching the sentinel on guard, and dressing a salald and cucumber.

After welcoming their sisters, they triumphantly displayed a table set out with such cold meat as an inn larder usually affords, exclaiming, “Is not this nice? Is not this an agreeable surprise?”

“And we mean to treat you all,” added Lydia; “but you must lend us the money, for we have just spent ours at the shop out there.” Then shewing her purchases: “Look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall pull it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I can make it up any better.” (Pride and Prejudice, 219)

Butler comments:

Edgeworth’s classic volumes are rightly placed by Austen among the literary breakthroughs of the 1790s because of their clever adaptation to the social realities of a commercial, entrepreneurial age. Her small marketable things assume a high degree of visibility, and their value is carefully explored … Edgeworth’s children’s fiction analyses the mainsprings of the late-century consumer boom and at the same time naturalizes it in humble daily life. (Butler, op. cit., xxiii-xxiv)

Maria Edgeworth was born in Oxfordshire in 1767, but she was Irish, and lived with her maternal grandparents. Her family were well connected in Ireland, having social affiliations with some members of the nobility. They owned land, but María was well acquainted with peasant

53 Butler, op. cit. xxv.
54 Consider, as a first take, the foolishness of Isabella in Northanger Abbey, Lydia’s continual interest in fashion, dancing and men in Pride and Prejudice, in contrast to her bookworm sister Mary’s dutiful trotting out of moralisms and her pre-occupation with reading, or the fascination with lace that Mrs. Elton has in Emma. In each case, these preoccupations commit their participants to the ‘foolish’ world of ‘trivial’ women who waste their time, and may place their families in financial jeopardy. Austen is very much concerned to examine the serious possibilities of women’s lives within the constraints of patriarchy, and to set apart those individuals who waste their opportunities.
55 While Marilyn Butler focuses on Maria Edgeworth’s children’s books as a source of understanding about small-business capitalism, literary critic George Saintsbury claims that her novel Belinda provides a model for some of Austen’s most spirited female characters. Saintsbury is also credited with coining the term ‘Janeite’ to refer to a follower of Jane Austen.
56 Information from www.nndb.com/people/137/000086876/.
life, and the hardships associated with that life, as well as nobility, because she worked between
the classes as an assistant to her father in managing his estates. She first wrote about the
advantages of female education, before publishing *The Parent’s Assistant* in 1796. They were
children’s stories for children.57 In 1801, she published *Moral Tales for Young People* and *Early
Lessons*.

Her writings were moralistic in tone, though often lively and interesting to read. But the parallel
to Austen’s own attempts at moral discourse is clear:

> Her books are character studies rather than intensely interesting narratives. Sobriety of judgment
> is seen throughout; and passion, romance and poetry rarely, if ever, shed their luster on her pages.
> Three of her aims were to paint national manners, to enforce morality, and to teach fashionable
> society by satirizing the lives of the idle and worldly. She expressly calls some of her
> stories “Moral Tales”; but they all fall under this category. In her pages the
> heroic virtues give place to prudence, industry, kindness and sweetness of
> temper. (www.nndb.com/people/137/000086876/. No author is cited)

As Butler tells us, Edgeworth is most concerned with the world of small commodities in a
family context.58 It is this process of ‘naturalizing’59 the new trading economy which is most
telling. Indeed, in reading the preface, of *The Parent’s Assistant*, it is surprising how
broadly entrepreneurial the whole work is.60 Two of the most familiar tales – *The Purple Jar,*
and *Lazy Lawrence* – concern value. What should we make of gifts and objects that have a
value in the market place and in the moral economy? The lessons to be learnt relate to our
relationship to the emerging market and to each other. In *The Purple Jar*, Rosamond
accompanies her mother shopping:

> Rosamond, a little girl about seven years old, was walking with her mother
> in the streets of London. As she passed along she looked in at the
> windows of several shops, and saw a great variety of different sorts of
> things, of which she did not know the use, or even the names. She wished
> to stop to look at them, but there was a great number of people in the
> streets, and a great many carts, carriages, and wheelbarrows, and she was
> afraid to let go her mother’s hand.

> “Oh, mother, how happy I should be,” she said, as she passed a toy-shop,
> “if I had all these pretty things!”
> “What, all! Do you wish for them all, Rosamond?”
> “Yes, mamma, all.”
> As she spoke they came to a milliner’s shop, the windows of which were
> decorated with ribbons and lace, and festoons of artificial flowers.

Faced with the panoply of metropolitan choice, the little girl is finally captured by the
‘glories’ of a ‘purple jar’, and after a long debate with her mother, in which she considers the
value of having her shoes resoled, or buying the purple jar, she chooses the jar. While her
feet hurt because her shoes have a hole in them, she cannot overcome her fascination with

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58 Butler, op. cit., xxiv.
59 Butler’s term.
60 By Christina Edgeworth Colvin, preface in *The Parent’s Assistant*, Maria Edgeworth, Garland, New York and London, 1976,
pages v-vii. Edgeworth was the oldest of twenty-two children, and often wrote these stories to entertain the younger ones,
before committing them to paper. Thus they were ‘… initially spoken, rather than written’. (Colvin, op. cit. vi)
the ‘purpleness’ of the jar. She compares the unpleasant smell of the cobbler’s shop with the purity of the jar, and she buys the jar. Of course, when she gets the jar home, and realizes that it is full of a dark substance on which it counts for its colour, she realizes the object is of little value. At the end of the piece, when she is invited by her mother and her father to walk out with them, she is unable to take part. The moral is obvious and direct. When confronted with the choices of the consumer economy, one must invoke sensible moral judgment, because practical consequences follow.

In *Lazy Lawrence* we hear of a money-making scheme. The widow Preston, who lives by running a small market garden, becomes sick, and is faced with the choice of selling her horse to pay the rent, or be turfed out. Her son Jem plans to make money another way. In Clifton, where his mother sometimes sells flowers, he has seen a women selling colorful stones. He decides to follow suit, and, while the woman herself will not tell him where they come from, he soon discovers their source. In partnership with a workman who has gathered some of these stones, he manages to sell them to a local woman making a grotto. She then employs him as a gardener, and he does well. Then he gets into the mat-making business and sells these. In this way, he raises the rent money.

‘Lazy Lawrence’ is the name of another boy in the neighborhood who is not industrious, and spends his days in ‘idleness’. Just before our hard-working hero Jem is about to settle the rent, Lawrence and an accomplice steal the money that Jem has aggregated through his industrious activities, for a gambling scheme. They are captured and brought to justice, with ‘Lazy Lawrence’ thrown into prison for a month, and his accomplice sent to Botany Bay. The moral of the tale is set out in the last paragraph:

During Lawrence’s confinement, Jem often visited him, and carried him such little presents as he could afford to give; and Jem could afford to be GENEROUS, because he was INDUSTRIOUS. Lawrence’s heart was touched by his kindness, and his example struck him so forcibly that, when his confinement was ended, he resolved to set immediately to work; and, to the astonishment of all who knew him, soon became remarkable for industry. He was found early and late at his work, established a new character, and for ever lost the name of “Lazy Lawrence.” (The Parent’s Assistant, Volume 1, page 74)

In *The Little Merchants*, the story opens with the following paragraphs:

Those who have visited Italy give us an agreeable picture of the cheerful industry of the children of all ages in the celebrated city of Naples. Their manner of living and their numerous employments are exactly described in the following “Extract from a Traveller’s Journal.” *

* Varieties of Literature, vol. i. p. 299.

“The children are busied in various ways. A great number of them bring fish for sale to town from Santa Lucia; others are very often seen about the arsenals, or wherever carpenters are at work, employed in gathering up the chips and pieces of wood; or by the sea-side, picking up sticks, and whatever else has drifted ashore, which, when their basket is full, they carry away.
“Children of two or three years old, who can scarcely crawl along upon the ground, in company with boys of five or six, are employed in this pretty trade. Hence they proceed with their baskets into the heart of the city, where in several places they form a sort of little market, sitting round with their stock of wood before them. Labourers, and the lower order of citizens, buy it of them to burn in the tripods for warming themselves, or to use in their scanty kitchens.

“Other children carry about for sale the water of the sulphurous wells, which, particularly in the spring season, is drunk in great abundance. Others again endeavour to turn a few pence by buying a small matter of fruit, of pressed honey, cakes, and comfits, and then, like little peddlers, offer and sell them to other children, always for no more profit than that they may have their share of them free of expense. (The Parent’s Assistant, pages 83-85)

Honesty and plain dealing are clearly the lessons to be learned from these tales, though what is even more immediately compelling is the plight of children almost too young to walk being drawn into this scraping misery of commerce. Tales are told of living by one’s wits, or as the result of hard work, and, of course, hard work wins out in each case. Honesty triumphs over cunning. A man’s character is his most precious asset. These are lessons for children to learn at their mother’s knee.61 While we might be tempted to argue that Butler overemphasizes the capitalist qualities of the Edgeworth writings, this powerful set of examples suggests she is not exaggerating when she describes the books as handbooks for dealing with the rise of the new commerce. They do indeed offer their ‘… young English writers a crash course in small-business capitalism’. (Butler, op. cit. xxiii) Everywhere, in almost every tale, we are shown how young people must apply themselves to the tasks of the new industries if they and their families are to thrive in the new economy, and just as importantly, if they are to develop and to hold on to their moral character.

But it is not only money that Austen learned about as a young women engaged in a program of voracious reading. She also became acquainted with the tradition of the Gothic novel. Ann Radcliffe, whose novel The Mysteries of Udolpho is discussed in Northanger Abbey, was a pioneer of the Gothic novel. In Austen’s novel, the following passage appears in a discussion between Isabella and Catherine:

“. . . Have you been gone on with Udolpho?
“Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.”
“Are you indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?”
“Oh! Yes, quite; what can it be? – But do not tell me – I would not be told on any account. I know it must be a skeleton . . . Oh! I am delighted by the book! I should like to spend my whole life reading it.62

Isabella and our heroine Catherine are clearly caught up with the novel to such a degree that they spend as much of their waking hours thinking about it, and then fitting what passes for the real world into the schemes of its plot. Thus it is not surprising that when Catherine later visits Northanger Abbey itself that she is predisposed to find mysteries, secrets and horrors, since she

and Isabella have prefigured these expectations. In fact, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is but one of a series of such novels that the female protagonists are caught up with. But it is as equally true that this obsession with romantic novels, which seems as natural as breathing air to Isabella and Catherine, is a pure nonsense to the ‘sensible’ John Thorpe:

“Have you ever read Udolpho. Mr. Thorpe?”

“Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; never read novels: I have something else to do. Novels are so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones … but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation.”

“I think you must like Udolpho, if you were to read it; it is so very interesting.”

Not I, faith! No, if I read any it shall be Mrs. Radcliff’s; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in them.”

“Udolpho was written by Mrs. Radcliff,” said Catherine, with some hesitation, from the fear of mortifying.

“No sure; was it? Aye, I remember, so it was; I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French immigrant.”

“I suppose you mean Camilla.” (*Northanger Abbey*, 45)

This discourse on the Gothic novel, of course, sets the scene for the satire of the Gothic tradition that Austen then develops. The assumptions of the logic of this genre clearly frame much of Isabella’s thinking, and it is with this discourse that Catherine debates as she forms her own opinions. The entire novel can thus be read a debate with the stereotypes and caricatures of this tradition

Ann Radcliffe was interested in explaining the many curious supernatural events in her novels in naturalistic form. She contrasted these unusual events with the modest and proper behaviour of her heroines. The wife of a journalist, William Radcliffe, she wrote novels to avoid boredom. In the film *Becoming Jane*, Ann Radcliffe is seen meeting with the young Jane Austen, and representing the successful female novelist of her period. In this brief, but powerful, exchange, Radcliffe makes it clear that success for women writers of this era has its costs in terms of social opprobrium and marginality. In a typical scene from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe displays something of the inner complexity which became so typical of the Austen novels. Here is the heroine Emily responding to a letter from Valancourt, the man she loves, but from whom she is separated:

This letter brought many tears to Emily’s eyes; tears of tenderness and satisfaction on learning that Valancourt was well, and that time and absence had in no degree effaced her image from his heart. There were passages in the letter that particularly affected her … (*Mysteries of Udolpho*, 198)

Here is Emily confronting the castle:

“There,” said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, “is Udolpho.”

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63 *Northanger Abbey*, page 37.
64 *Camilla*, of course, was written by Frances Burney, who married the ‘Frenchman’ General Alexandre D’Arblay. They were married in 1793. He was a supporter of the revolution in France, a Catholic, and impecunious. For these reasons, Frances Burney’s father opposed the match.
65 *Becoming Jane*, (2007) directed by Julian Jarold, BBC and Irish Film Board, starring Anne Hathaway and James McAvoy.
Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle...though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the Gothic greatness of its features and its mouldering walls of dark, grey stone, rendered it a gloomy object and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those, too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity; and Emily continued to gaze till its clustering towers were alone seen rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.

The extent and darkness of these tall woods awakened terrific images in her mind, and she almost expected to see banditti start up from under the trees. (Mysteries of Udolpho, 230)

All the imagery of the Gothic tradition is here, with its mixture of power, domination and dread. Domination is never without melancholy and awe. The dominance of the building also provokes a meditation on decay and fear. The sunshine illuminates, but it also cloaks with anxiety. The female protagonist confronts again the image of male power.

Contrast this image with that of the one Catherine creates in Northanger Abbey as she reflects on her feelings during her first visit:

The night was stormy; the wind had been rising up at intervals the whole afternoon; and by the time the party broke up, it blew and rained violently. Catherine, as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with a sensation of awe; and when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she really was in an Abbey. – Yes, these were characteristic sounds – they brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situations and horrid scenes, which such buildings had witnessed, and such storms ushered in; and most heartily did she rejoice in the happier circumstances attending her entrance within these walls solemn! – She had nothing to dread from midnight assassins or drunken gallants.66

In fact, her first view of the Abbey lacks dread entirely:

As they drew near the end of their journey, her impatience for a sight of the abbey – for some time suspended by his (Henry’s) conversation on subjects very different – returned in full force, and every bend in the road was expected with solemn awe to afford a glimpse of its massy walls of grey stone, rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks, with the last beams of sun playing in beautiful splendour on its high Gothic windows ... But so low did the building stand, that she found herself passing through the great gates of the lodge into the very grounds of Northanger, without having discerned even an antique chimney. (Northanger Abbey, 140-141)

What is striking here is that the very words used by Radcliffe to describe Udolpho are used again here in a slightly different order as Catherine describes the Abbey. It is as if Austen read the

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66 This is a direct reference to Radcliffe’s novel, and in the Penguin version of Northanger Abbey, the following note is attached under footnote 76: ‘Two drunken gallants, Verrezi and Bertolini, chase Emily through the passages of Udolpho (Mysteries of Udolpho, ed. Dobrée, pages 430-435)
section in the Radcliffe novel just before writing this passage. It is not that the same phrases appear precisely, but the vocabulary of ‘awe’, ‘sunshine’, ‘gray stones’ and the like is identical, though now fashioned in a different direction to undercut the Gothic delusion.

Burney, Edgeworth and Radcliffe therefore combine to provide some of the stylistic elements that Austen used, parodied and reinvented in her novels. Like Catherine, she must herself have lived in this world of continuous reading and imagination to some degree as she wrote her own work. While she produced work of great originality, her own obsession with reading novels and literature meant that we can imagine that she spent many hours in that twilight world away from the cares of the everyday that all of us inhabit when we enjoy novels. The difference with Austen, of course, is that she ‘reads’ these interpretations continually as limited meditations on a small world of domestic politics trying to be large, as attempts by women living in limited society to make sense of the larger through imagination and guile. Through this reinvention, she provided her own contribution to the conversation, and allowed us to disappear with her into the realm of rural domestic life.

3. The World of Broader Ideas

There are also ‘larger ideas’ that we must briefly visit to round out this review of Austen’s intellectual context. In Claudia Johnson’s two books *Jane Austen* and *Equivocal Beings,* we are provided with a thoughtful summary of these larger views. Johnson comments:

For many years it was universally acknowledged that Austen defined herself negatively vis-à-vis … (Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe and Burney) …, shunning the plots of Wollstonecraft’s radical feminism, Radcliffe’s exaggerated Gothicism, and Burney’s escalated melodrama, and opting instead to exercise the cameoist’s meticulously understated craft … (but)… she inaugurates her career by asserting solidarity with a distinctly feminine tradition of novelists that developed in the late 18th century, a tradition in which Burney and Radcliffe ranked very high. Though Wollstonecraft remained an unmentionable throughout Austen’s career, there is ample evidence that she too was a figure Austen reckoned with. Indeed, in many respects *Emma* actually succeeds at Wollstonecraft’s grand aim better than Wollstonecraft did: diminishing the authority of male sentimentality, and reimmasculating men and women alike with a high sense of national purpose. (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings,* 191)

What is this claim to national feeling that Austen makes? Was she simply a patriot enforcing conservative rules as a reflection of the dominant ideology of the day? Clearly Johnson is arguing that her work reflects more than the mere musings of a small-scale scribbler. After a review of critical work on the women writers of the period, she comments:

“… it is true that during the 1790s in particular, sentimentalism and gothicism converged to produce a body of novels distinctive first and foremost for their egregious affectivity. In works by Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Godwin, Lewis and Burney … emotions are saturated in turbulent and disfiguring excess; not simply patently disruptive emotions – such as ambition, greed anger, lust – but ostensibly gender ones as well

– such as reverence, sorrow, even filial devotion – are always and obviously going over the top, and then some. (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, 1-2)

Austen, of course is in a different league, according to most critics, using her judgment in a discerning and balanced way. But Johnson wants to claim that this is a misguided view, and that instead we should judge the writing of this period as a creative answer to a very troubled politics. Her claim, which is a compelling and bold argument, proposes that it was not a time when private troubles could be kept in check. Instead, they burst out into the open, and were the subject of public discourse. Thus, she concludes, the welfare of the nation and the tears of individuals were closely connected.

Our concern here is with the ideas beyond literature that may have served to shape it, so Johnson’s musings are of particular interest. It was the revolution in France which set the tone, of course, but what that revolution precisely underscored was a great change in social structure. It was not just romanticism that called out for the past, but tradition and memory in human individuals. People wanted the past simply because it was the past - familiar and not too much trouble. The future was certainly troublesome in prospect. It is Burke’s analysis which Johnson places at the center of this debate about the larger ideas that dominated the Regency period. Burke is able to say, without much intermediate argumentation, that the collapse of France into revolution results from the rise of ‘monstrously cold-hearted men’, and that what is at stake in the political shifts of the time is the fundamental role of sensibility. When sensibility runs riot and revolution goes unchecked, these small matters of agency, individual, limited and private, become social, public and revolutionary. Politics and the self, the great and the small, the domestic and the national, are now closely connected.

For Burke, orthodox society depended on the sensitive male patriarch to manage his inevitable power benevolently. In Austen’s world, if men are to have power, they are to use it with care and justice. It all depends for its efficacy on a revolution in manners, so that polite society can call upon a retinue of tools of sociability which accord women a public life alongside men, though clearly in subordinate roles. Thus it is the struggle over gender that Johnson is able to place both at the centre of the novelistic enterprise, and at the center of political and social debate. Yet here is what Claudia Johnson concludes about the politics of gender in Jane Austen’s novels. In talking about critics of Wollstonecraft, Burney and Radcliffe, she comments:

> If their work “failed” to conform to the standards of realism and quality on which Watt and others explicitly or implicitly relied, they also “failed” to be what many critics thought novels, especially novels by women, ought to be: exquisitely controlled, serenely apolitical, and archly unassuming – like Austen’s supposed cameos of “domestic” life. (Op. cit, 18)

While I am in deep sympathy with Johnson’s attempted rehabilitation of Wollstonecraft, Burney and Radcliffe from the harsh excesses of criticism to which they have been subjected, it hardly seems necessary to dismiss the politics of Austen in the same breath. But, as we shall see in

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Johnson’s *Jane Austen*, she does not believe that politics is absent from the Austen account. Her theory of the ‘small politics’ of the Austen novels is a powerful antidote to both the traditional masculinist theorem of her unworldliness, and the apparent dismissal of Austen’s contribution as a ‘merely’ domestic tale, with nothing to say about the larger world.

Johnson argues persuasively that in the postmodern critical climate it is in the very breaks with the past, the dislocations and disjunctures, that we can find critical traction in the works of Wollstonecroft, Burney and Radcliffe. Given the disruptive and disrupting history of the period, with substantial and real challenges to the orthodox order across the channel, nothing could be more plausible than the writing of novels of heightened emotion, dread, anxiety and trouble. The calm Austen spreads over all this is, in fact, the anomaly.

In *Emma*, Johnson argues, gender is the broad social question before us, and it is to the masculine nature of the central character we are drawn. But is *Emma* also about national feeling, we are asked? Johnson argues:

> … no less discriminating a critic than Lionel Trilling advanced (such) a thesis … when he declared that *Emma* “is touched – lightly but indubitably – by national feeling” With its tribute to “English verdure, English culture, English comfort,” *Emma* tends, as Trilling puts it, “to conceive of a specifically English ideal of life” (Johnson, op. cit. 191)

In the last chapter of her *Equivocal Beings*, Johnson draws two claims together – the claim that Austen had an interest in the broad question of what constituted an English way of life, in short, the national sense England might have had of herself, and the second claim about gender that *Emma* reconfigures. This argument will allow us to traverse two of the larger ideas prevalent in Austen’s time.

How is *Emma* to be read as a transgressive text with regard to gender? Johnson argues that Trilling and others have long called the Ms. Woodhouse of *Emma* the most ‘masculine’ of Austen’s heroines because of her peculiar position of financial strength, and her freedom from direct male domination. With a milksop of a father, and a Mr. Knightley that she can keep conveniently at arms length when she wants to, she runs the family that most commands respect in Highbury. She pays no particular attention to male opinion unless she chooses to. Given the context of her time, then, and the parts that men and women were expected to take up, she is transgressive. By Edmund Wilson, Emma was charged with lesbianism for failing to express the ‘correct’ form of interest in men:

> Emma, who was relatively indifferent to men, was inclined to infatuations with women; and what reason is there to believe that her marriage with Knightley would prevent her from going on as she had done before: from discovering a new young lady as appealing as Harriet Smith, dominating her personality, and situating her in a dream-world of Emma’s own … He would be lucky if he did not presently find himself saddled, along with other awkward features of the arrangement, with one of Emma’s young

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72 She comments: ‘Having myself argued for Austen’s engagement in many of the politicized debates of the 1790s … I obviously do not agree that Austen’s work is so ‘limited’ in the first place.

73 Johnson, op. cit. 19.

74 *Enchanted Beings*, 192.
protégées as an actual member of the household. (Wilson, cited in Johnson, 193)\textsuperscript{75}

Johnson’s speculations are hard to take seriously here, as she accuses Wilson of characterizing Emma as an ‘off-stage lesbian’, of creating a fantasy about ménages-a-trois in the Knightley household, an especially adventurous ploy, given that Hartfield will house Emma, Mr. Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse after her marriage. But the point is taken. Emma is not the simpering, male-directed, marriage-obsessed devotee that inhabits the other Austen novels, but she is obsessed by marriage as a plan for all other women, which expresses a form of dominance usually assigned to elder matrons, or women trying to get their daughters married, as we see in the life-work of Mrs. Bennet.

Of course, the absence of an argument beyond sexuality and desire to explain women’s behaviour has its obvious limits, and its limits are telling here. As we readily surmise in the first line of Pride and Prejudice, marriage is a strategic move aimed at economic and social security, as much as it is about desire. Thus it is entirely unsurprising that Emma’s unusual position of economic dominance gives her some latitude in the matter of hunting for a suitable man. Instead, she can wait to be hunted, or just decide the whole business is absurd. But again, we are reduced to a sort of sexual essentialism in this argument. Humans are desiring beings, and if men aren’t available, then women will be. It is merely a matter of preference, rather than escape. Sex will out, Johnson seems to be saying; it cannot be avoided. Reducing human behaviour merely to sexual preference, as we might sometimes infer from these claims, rather than allowing for economic and social dimensions to enter in, does limit what can be said.

But the argument certainly raises the question of gender in Emma in a most interesting way. And we can probably agree that ‘The novel basically accepts as attractive and as legitimate Emma’s forcefulness’. (Johnson, op. cit., 196) But the common strategy, seen very widely in the Austen critical canon, to drag contemporary ideas from the postmodern literature, and then force, squeeze and bend them until they fit into Austen’s world often seems faintly absurd, as if Austen can be counted on, at one and the same time, to be a supporter of traditional ideas, of the gay community as a sort of proto-activist lesbian, as a feminist of various stripes, or merely a social progressive just waiting her time to break out and declare herself. The accounts that result from this kind of awkward anti-hermeneutic tell us much more about the writers than they do about Austen, because so frequently the theoretical apparatus being applied bulldozes the Austen text to one side, attaching to it only so far as it may prove a point for the writer. We are on far stronger ground when we try to examine Austen’s work with the theoretical understandings of her era, which, of course, Johnson and others also achieve.

And Johnson is more convincing when she attacks the essentialism of classical criticism, which wants to claim there is something biologically determined, something in the ‘nature’ of men and women, which will direct them to behave with proper social grace. The policing of Emma’s character is thus easily understood, as is the feminization of Mr. Woodhouse, and his naming as a “silly old woman”.\textsuperscript{76} The dangers of being transgressive are, in each case, clear.

\textsuperscript{75} The Wilson quotation is lifted from Edmund Wilson’s “A Long Talk about Jane Austen,” in Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties. (New York, Farrar and Strauss, 1950) pages 201-203.

\textsuperscript{76} Johnson, 197. Again she is quoting Wilson as the first to name Woodhouse with this tag.
Johnson now brings us face to face with the connection between sensibility on the smallest scale and changes in society on the largest scale. She argues:

During the 1790s, a man’s “benevolent nerves” carried a national agenda: they were formed by and guaranteed the continuation of the charm, the beauty, the hospitality, and the goodness of Old England itself, which liked it gallant old ways even if they did not make sense, and which won our love, veneration, and loyalty. In a world where the “age of chivalry” was ebbing, where the courtesies of the old régime were being displaced by the cold economic calculation of the new one, a Woodhousian man of feeling held out for civility; his attachment to the old ways preserved continuity and order, while qualities such as energy, penetration, forcefulness, brusqueness, bluntness, and decision were deemed dangerous, volatile and cold. (Johnson, op. cit. 198)

This is an extraordinarily important connection to make, because it suggests to us that the small sociology that Austen elaborates is also, by inference a sociology of the very large, denoting in its account of individual sensibilities, a connection to the old, or an interest in the new, forms of society. And, further, Johnson wants to claim that masculinity itself was ‘under construction’, or perhaps reconstruction. This is, again, a structuralist argument in the making, that suggests that new ways of imagining the world, of orienting individuals to the world, in short, a new social and individual habitus77 was coming into being at this time, made necessary by the shift in the mode of production. Men of Mr. Woodhouse’s dispositions were only ‘useful’ to sit back and defend what they had, which was, of course, privilege, wealth and leisure based on the old, landed way of life. To go forward into the new era required energy, the willingness to risk, to surge ahead, to achieve, which many of Austen’s heroes and heroines, from D’Arcy and Elizabeth to Knightley, Brandon and Marianne, have in abundance. This is why Mr. Woodhouse is, in the end, a figure so much to be pitied, a pitiful residue of a way of life rapidly passing. Affect, feeling, sentiment – these were things of the past. The new masculinity must be tuned with the needs of the world, and the new world required men of few words, little sentiment and much activity.

Johnson’s Jane Austen reminds us of the social hierarchy in which women wrote during this time. Men were capable of work of the first order by fiat, and women, however brilliant, could only achieve secondary status.78 Austen was, by any objective standards, a member of the ‘middling classes’, and while she might have been claimed by the landed gentry, she was never in her life a member of that class, much less of the nobility. Her social and cultural skills were of a high calibre, but in the complicated equation of class, her economic position rarely allowed her much ease, and certainly excluded her from a world of privilege and entitlement. Johnson’s case is persuasive and important on this point.79 Even if Austen were to be easily assigned to the ‘ruling class’, it would be a clumsy error then to ‘read’ her ideas merely as a reflection of this class position. And since she doesn’t sit there easily, it is all the more foolish to come to the simple conclusion that she speaks unthinkingly for privilege.80

77 Bourdieu’s term for durable dispositions.
79 Jane Austen, op.cit. xviii.
80 I am indebted here to Johnson’s reference to the work of David Spring and Janet Todd, which pursue this issue much further, and whose work I report in the last part of the chapter. The brilliance of Johnson’s work is not in question here, but it is perhaps ironic that she comments: ‘… historical and biographical Austenian scholarship … has always been preceded by very definite ideas about what it would find there’ (op. cit xix). The same could be said of Johnson’s own work, as I have suggested.
Johnson’s claim is that the boundary between the novel of the interior, and the novel focusing on broader social questions was permeable, and that Austen read the novels of her day, and was fully conversant with the flood of ideas in the larger world.\textsuperscript{81} She further claims, with good reason, I believe, given the wider history set out in earlier sections, that in the period of reaction which England was experiencing, that novelists routinely resorted to rhetorical devices that allowed them to develop criticism, and still maintain their liberty. A certain subtlety of thought is here required here, not just of the writer, of course, but of the members of the reading public, including those who look back two centuries to make sense of all this.\textsuperscript{82} More than this, Johnson wants to argue that general ideas about liberty and freedom preceded the French revolution, and were in the air among the educated classes independent of events across the Channel.\textsuperscript{83} And indeed the characters of Emma and Elizabeth Bennet directly transgress every proper feeling that would have been found acceptable in traditional society.\textsuperscript{84} In a telling commentary on \textit{Northanger Abbey}, Johnson brings us to the main argument of her book:

\begin{quote}
\ldots at the outset of the novel, Austen lays it down as axiomatic that Catherine is intimidated by and deferent to self-assured men. But we should not assume that just because Catherine is awed by Henry Tilney, Austen is as well. \ldots far from proving that women must steer clear from matters as arcane as politics, (the speech) shows on the contrary that all subjects lead to it \ldots And part of the larger structural irony of the novel is that Catherine talks about politics every time she opens her mouth, whenever she considers the harshness of General Tilney’s paternal authority, for example, or questions Henry’s judgment \ldots When we compare Austen’s novels to those of her more conspicuously political sister-novelists – conservative and progressive alike – we discover that she routinely employs a lexicon of politically sensitive terms, themes, and narrative patterns that she inherited from their fictions, and that she …
\end{quote}

Johnson has provided us with an argument that will resonate throughout the rest of this book. She has confirmed for us that the politics of Jane Austen is the politics of the infinitely small, but that it is not confined to this level. In sociological terms, what Austen contributes to an understanding of her time is her close attention to the minute practices of daily life, in the drawing rooms, the bedrooms, and the interior musings of the women and men she wrote about. This is a rich telling of human agency, and it is an incomparable account of where human action comes from, what motivates it, and how the smallest elements of the social landscape work themselves out. From this, we can read trenchant critiques of patriarchy, primogeniture and gender battles. And by looking out towards the larger social landscape, we gain a new reading on revolution, the structure of economic life, democracy, the boundaries of social class, and the relation between nationalism and individual feeling.

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above, and indeed, is doubtless true of this present book. This is a good methodological caveat for all researchers to put in place as we do our work.  
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\textsuperscript{81} Johnson, op. cit., xx.  
\textsuperscript{82} Op. cit. xxi.  
\textsuperscript{83} Op. cit. xxi-xxii.  
\textsuperscript{84} Op. cit, xxiii.
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4. Conclusion: The Life of Jane Austen

The ‘Age of Revolution’, therefore was dominated by large questions of democracy, revolution, the role of the nobility in the political systems, as well as more general ideas about liberty and the public welfare. On the smaller stage of everyday life, these large ideas played out in the way men and women treated each other, the way novels were interpreted, the conversations that developed, and the new styles of social life that were evolving. And behind all this, the very nature of the economic world was shifting dramatically with the rise of cities and industry. ‘Men of Purpose’ were stepping forward to take charge of this world, and the languid, gentlemanlike ways of the past were disappearing. We see both these styles of manners in the Austen novels.\(^{85}\)

In Raymond Williams’ much-celebrated *The Country and the City*, he tells us what is at stake in this shift from rural to urban life:

> Country and city are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember what they stand for in the experience of human communities. In English, ‘country’ is both a nation and part of a land. The country can be the whole of society or its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which we directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society have been deeply known. And one of these achievements has been the city; the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization.

> On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalized. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life, of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center, of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed; on the city as a place of noise, worldliness, and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.

> Yet the real history has been astonishingly varied … Even the idea of the village, which seems simple, shows in actual history a wide variation. (Williams, op. cit, page 1)

Fundamental ideas of time, space and self were shifting during this period. The seasonal basis for time, established in the country on the foundation of well-worn tradition, was being thrown aside by clock-time, fundamental to the industrial world of measurement, precision and science.

\(^{85}\) There is, of course, a tradition of writing that we are overlooking here that relates directly to the question of ‘manners’. The ‘novel of manners’, which Austen, along with Burney and Wharton are said to have developed, is typified as a work that concentrates on a certain code of ethics, and the degree to which participants in the novel adhere to this code. Wharton’s *The Valley of Decision* (1902) and the more well-known *The House of Mirth* (1905) are sometimes depicted as primarily concerned with a code of private conduct among a certain narrow class stratum, much as Austen and Burney wrote about the private details of a certain social ranking. Of course, the more important question is whether these novels are more than simple depictions of everyday life – a sort of descriptive ethnography of family, or whether they are distinguished analytically. Norbert Elias, the sociologist, has written with great insight about the history of manners. His two volume work, *The Civilizing Process, Volume One, The History of Manners* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969) and *Volume Two: State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1982) is celebrated for detailing, among other things, the rise of an elaborate system of social deference and social tastes among European elites. Obscure for many years, Elias became celebrated during the 1970s with the fall of various forms of sociological structuralism, both of the structural-functional kind and the Althusserian, and, in its stead, the rise of a new humanist sociology. The larger field of the ‘Comedy of Manners’ includes several of the Greek Playwrights, an array of medieval writers, and clearly Shakespeare in Much Ado about Nothing, but continues through Restoration Comedy and Molière to Oscar Wilde and P.G. Wodehouse.
The limitless space of the landscape was being replaced by the rectangular space of the city. As transport developed, the capacity of people to cross the landscape was transformed. The space that could be traversed in a day was dramatically increased, so the sense of the human boundary was altered. And, as important as anything else, the emergence of the new society meant the sense people had of themselves, either as tightly-knit members of small communities, or as isolated atoms in a confusing city, was also in a state of flux.

Austen’s account of her time was mostly of village life, with the city as a backdrop, and it is mostly the story of women. Perhaps too, it is also the story of the ‘small politics’ of domestic life. But the most central question to answer here is how to place Austen in all this. She did not struggle in the working class, though poverty was always a worry. Nor did she nestle in a life of privilege, though her characters strived for security in landed property.

So where are we to place Austen herself? We already know that she was well-educated, a ‘gentlewoman’, who had socially significant connections, and who resided in the country. Can we be more precise? Consider, first, the environment she was born into and grew up in:

… the countryside of southern England, where she spent most of her life, was a pleasing and reassuring region, with its green smiling landscape of field and woodland and leafy hedgerows, of spacious skies and soft horizons; and with something at once homely and immemorial in the atmosphere emanating from its thatched villages, each centring (sp.) around a grey old church, its interior enriched with sculptured monuments of successive generations of local landowners and set in a grassy churchyard populated by gravestones inscribed with the names of successive generations of their tenants; and the two combining to suggest an extraordinary feeling of social and family solidarity and continuity.

(Cecil, 1979, 10-11)

Jane Austen was a ‘child of the gentry’, which meant she came from that class of men and women on the edge of wealth, but for whom respectability and achievement were paramount. Her father was a parson, as we know. Other relatives owned land, or were officers in the Navy. In essence, the gentry were landowners, renting out their land, rather than working it themselves. Located between the nobility and the yeomanry, they survived in relative stability for several hundred years in England. The term ‘yeomanry’ referred to that category of people who owned land and worked it themselves. A term of worth, it referred to the self-sustaining, hard-working class of small farmers that Harriet’s Smith’s Mr. Robert Martin so clearly embodies. The gentry, assuming they carried out their roles in a responsible way, gained respect in the social hierarchy from above and below. This, at least, is the view most commonly held in Austen’s time.

Good sense, a practical turn of mind and a sense of duty, both to the nation and to God, were the dominant daily values of this world. It was also an era that valued ‘taste’:

Taste implied learning and discrimination; learning and discrimination were acquired by a thorough grounding in the established and classical tradition of scholarship and the arts. The grounding combined with the

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virile vitality of the age to produce a strong, fresh culture: in thought and architecture and painting and literature. (Cecil, 16)

And central to our understanding of Jane Austen, the interior life of the nation was also developing:

Private life flowered as never before in English history; so also the modes of thought through which it expressed itself, the arts of conversation and letter-writing. Manners were looked on almost as an aspect of morals; politeness almost a virtue. Concern for politeness was, like everything else, checked by realistic good sense. The eighteenth century mocked mercilessly at the affected and precious; and even at its most moral, it was not squeamish. Its talk was racy as well as polished. … Like its houses and its chairs and its teacups, social intercourse in eighteenth-century England was the expression of a society that, at its best, managed to be at the same time both sensible and stylish. (Cecil, 17)

Cecil’s story of Austen’s world seems like a delicate balancing act of wishful thinking, however. First, Austen’s social class was poised between the rising yeomen, the changing laws of enclosure, and the will of the nobility. Then the industrial revolution was arriving like an immoderate train, ready to drag everything in its wake, especially those with few resources, who planned to hold to the past. And each side of this era, we have depictions of great unrest and disorder:

England in the first half of the century – the riotous, brutal, uproarious England depicted in Hogarth’s pictures and Smollett’s novels – was far from civilized in any high sense of the word, and some of its less pleasing characteristics were exhibited even by the people who sought to civilize it. (Cecil, 17)

And of course, what followed in the 19th century was industry, the rise of cities, social and political unrest, and a change forever in the ‘English way of life’, whatever that meant. And we can hardly overlook the social revolution in France occurring just as Austen came to her maturity. So while Cecil may claim that this ‘form of society’ was ‘elegant, established and poised’, it was a poise of great fragility and fleeting permanence. But, however permanent, Cecil claims that this fragile ‘moment’ in English history provided a particular role for women to play:

(A) growing refinement of manners went along with the growing social influence of women. … high society women had often been influential, even formidable; the names of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu are enough to remind us of this. But these names suggest that they were powerful in virtue of what are generally looked upon as masculine qualities: masterfulness, aggressiveness, force of personality. In the later eighteenth century, growing refinement of feeling and taste led to women exercising influence by their characteristically feminine qualities and talents: intimacy, imaginative sympathy, graceful manners. Moreover with the flowering of social and private life these had more scope to display themselves than earlier. Always, in so far as society cultivates social pleasures and sets store by the private life, women grow more powerful. Women rule private life as men rule public. So it was in the late eighteenth century in England. This was the period when English aristocratic society was most agreeable. This was the period …of brilliant hostesses. In the professional classes, also, women grew strong…. At the same time, women’s intellectual position became more important. It was
now that the phrase ‘blue stocking’ was coined to describe such formidable ladies as Mrs. Montagu, the Shakespearian critic, and Miss Anna Seward whose poems earned her the name ‘The Swan of Lichfield’. Fanny Burney herself is the first female novelist to achieve the rank of a classic….

It is a satisfactory society and a rare one that succeeds … in combining good sense, good manners and cultivated intelligence, rational piety and a spirited sense of fun.

Certainly it suited Jane Austen. (Cecil, 19)

This idealized examination of Austen’s universe lacks the precision we need that would help us finally place Austen in the social context of her time. Its idealization is a process we all engage in when we read Austen, but it masks the real conditions of her existence. But the social historian David Spring has done us the service of closing this elision.90 Spring is at pains to develop a social history of the period. Her ‘England’, he argues, was the England of the rural elite.91 In a detailed passage on the language Austen used, Spring usefully reminds us of the way Austen viewed rank, in a world which did not yet speak of class in a self-conscious way:

Jane Austen’s vocabulary .. (is) one that fits her world of the rural elite … What, then, is her social language? “Neighborhood” has already been noted as comprising the rural elite. Expressions like “the very great” or “resident landholder,” or “profession” designate groups within that part of the elite – all of them covered by the word “gentleman”. For those parts of society in varying degrees inferior to her elite she uses a variety of expressions such as “the second rate and third rate,” or “half gentlemen,” or for the very lowest “the poor.” Or she may specify these inferiors as “yeomen,” “laborers” “tenant farmers,” or “in trade” – all of them, as she would say “in a low line”. The word “line” – like such words as “sphere,” “circle,” or “rank” – does some of the work that the language of class would do later to indicate large divisions within society. (Spring, 55)

The question that remains to be answered, then, is if she had this sharp focus on the gentry, took them to be the fixed point in the universe from which all other ranks were to be measured, estimated and judge, where does she find herself located? Jane Austen has been seen rather loosely as the chronicler of the ruling class, of the middle classes and of the bourgeoisie, all rather distinct entities.92 Money is everywhere in her novels, to be sure, but this hardly makes her the simple lickspittle of the emerging capitalists. The landed gentry were distinguished from the aristocracy by rank, but also by lifestyle – routinely they had less money to spend.93 Great houses, incomes hundreds of times the value of a working family’s income, made, at least in some cases, for unimaginable wealth and privilege. This was hardly Austen’s world. Rather than 100,000 pounds at the top of the ladder, or the 10,000 pounds a year that Mr. Darcy is said to command, the gentry might struggle by on 1,000-2,000 pounds, as does Mr. Bennet and Colonel Brandon.94 At the bottom end of the scale, those on 1,000 to 2,000 pounds a year were scarcely able to maintain an ‘honorable’ lifestyle.

91 Spring, 55.
92 Spring, 56.
93 Spring, 58
94 Spring, 58.
But while Austen clearly admired the respectable habits, the hard work and potential decency of the gentry, she was not one of them. She belonged instead to that group who aided and abetted the landed classes:

This group comprised the non-landed: the professional and rentier families, first and foremost the Anglican clergy; second, other professions like the law – preferably barristers, rather than solicitors – and the fighting services; and last the rentiers recently or long retired from business … if they owned land, and doubtless many of them owned some, they owned comparatively little … They were neither lords of manners nor collectors of rent from tenant farmers. But they lived in big houses, held or owned enough land to ensure privacy, that most cherished of social delights.…

(Spring, 59-60)

Instead of the gentry, then, Austen properly belonged to what Alan Everitt has called the ‘pseudo-gentry.’ These were people who aspired to be gentry, who had the social graces of the gentry, who associated with the gentry, but never actually had the land to allow themselves to enter fully into this world. But their social graces, their cultural capital, their ways of speaking, thinking and talking were of that sphere, even if their economic condition separated them from it. They had:

… a sharp eye for the social escalators, were skilled at getting on them, and (what was more important) no less skilled in staying on them … Of this … competition, no one knew more than Jane Austen. Her novels are full of it. She saw its range and idiosyncrasies and absurdities as someone might who among other things combined the gifts of an estate agent, family lawyer and auctioneer … On the male side, there were rich men like Henry Crawford, skilled in turning an ordinary house into something more than a gentlemen’s seat, into a “place … as to make its owner be set down as the great landholder of the parish” … On the female side, there were well-to-do young women like Emma Woodhouse who measure precisely how status was affected by setting up one’s carriage or keeping dining company … (Spring, 61)

Marriage, of course was the great step forward, that ‘bitter trade’ that Austen disliked so much. The world into which Austen was born was that of the well-to-do clergy. Austen’s father was one such clergyman. His position in the world enabled his family to live a life of semi-gentrification, and to secure footholds for Austen’s brothers in land, the navy and in the clergy. A final comment from Spring should allow us to place Austen once and for all in a clear social position:

Although English landowners were not commercial or industrial capitalists, they were agrarian capitalists. In their own sphere, they were economic modernizers … Their businesslike agriculture was … an

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The term ‘rentier’ usually refers to a person who lives off rents and investments incomes at this time. At a later date, it was a term widely used by Marx.


A real estate agent in the United States.

There is a footnote reference here to Mansfield Park, 243-244.

Spring cites this comment on page 61 of his text.

Spring, 62.
improving agriculture: improving cultivation, improving rents, and at the same time undertaking a massive transformation of the English landscape in the shape of the enclosure movement. (Spring, 64)

This impulse to improvement and management meant that agriculture did not get stuck in a backwater, but was rather a key element in the commodification and capitalization of the English economy in general. But Austen’s world was not a universe that was quickly changing. Her particular sphere had close and useful connections with the powerful influences of her day, and they were not likely to be smashed and disordered any time soon.101

So Austen sat in an awkward place between the industrious, hard-working yeomanry and the truly landed, for whom she had some admiration and doubtless envy. She read both these worlds with extraordinary skill. But it was a world full of complication. All moments in history may be seen, in retrospect, to be ‘on the move’, but Austen’s ‘moment’ seems especially volatile, a sharp contrast to the small settings she wrote about, which seem, for all their drama, to be placed in relatively certain structures of belief and behaviour. So she captures for us a still moment in a particular stratum of English rural society, even as profound shifts were disturbing the deep structures of social and political life.

She does this in a variety of social fields. In what remains, I track this analysis through the fields of small economics and family money, the use of food and culinary practices, fashion and housing. What we discover, if we didn’t already know it, is that we can add to the triumphs, and the limits, of Austen’s achievements, when we realize the full scope of what she has done.

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