



ORIGINAL PAPER

Jane Austen: Modern Supremacy

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Abstract

Two hundred years after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen's work surprises with an unexpected modernity and actuality. Her novels have been adapted for TV and the big screen, and sequels have been written by enthusiastic followers. This study is conducted to assess the effects of the importance of Jane's thoughts in modern community, such as social injustice, power of hope, accuracy, challenge, loyalty, free will, self-improvement and honour, and how her fiction affected the audience till nowadays. Her modernity is seen through the mirror of realism, feminism, morality, and postcolonialism.

Keywords: *Austen; feminism; modernity; morality; postcolonialism; realism.*

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Introduction: Education and Training of a Woman Writer

In chapter 5 of *Persuasion*, we find the following comment about the Musgrove family: “The Musgroves, like their houses, were *in a state of alteration*, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother were in the old English style, and the young people in the new. Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove were a very good sort of people; friendly and hospitable, not much educated, and not at all elegant. Their children had more modern minds and manners.” (*Persuasion*: 27-28) It seems that Jane Austen has captured the essence of modernity, its elusive nature, and ambivalence. It is a certain degree of anxiety, or even discontent about the nature and value of modernity which is not easily discounted, despite the dominance of positivistic approaches to it.

There is no doubt that art is a source for a right lesson, an attempt to answer important questions about life and human nature in relation to particular individuals. So at that period the propensity was to read dramas and novels. Actually, the bright time of Jane Austen’s early life helped her to face an agreeable variety of society. And these sources of pleasure stirred her talent and she began to write short stories in the simple, pure and idiomatic English in which they are composed, quite different from the over decorated style. Recently, Jane Austen was crowned as queen of comic romantic, and her six novels, reflect many kinds of man-woman relations, and various personalities, although they all split in their passionate stories.

After Jane’s experience of life at Godmersham, amongst rich landowners as her brother and his neighbours, the novels of her maturity – *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* – are written much more from the point of view of that rank of society: the domestic lives of the men who have the responsibility of managing large estates and leading their local communities. Women novelists had been increasing in number throughout the eighteenth century and they actually formed a majority towards the end, and Jane Austen exists in our consciousness in a liminal historical space between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It was a time when religious education began at home as the foundation for everything else. Some critics have argued that Austen’s Aristotelian ideas were the result of her reading accepted philosophical, didactic, and religious works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

They suggest that there is a process to learning virtue and becoming moral; and they view ethical life as teleological in nature, with the practice of virtue aiming towards a higher good, her fiction aiming to develop the difference of vice and virtue within the society. Janett Todd, in her volume *Jane Austen in Context* has the following comment on the relationship between Austen’s construction of linguistic models and the social conventions of her time:

“Jane Austen's concern with constructing appropriate linguistic models to reflect social and moral conventions manifests itself to reflect social and moral conventions manifests itself in her use and refinement of various stylistic techniques. A fundamental issue in Austen's fiction is the importance of conversation, owing to the fact that a woman’s sphere of action was considerably restricted in the nineteenth-century gentry world” (Todd, 2005:28).

Austen’s novels revolve around the basic issue of the female protagonists’ education which is/should be directed towards personal moral improvement. The keyword of her six published novels – *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818, posthumous),

and *Persuasion* (1818, posthumous) – is morality, which includes the observance of manners, fulfilling one's duty to society, and living according to the religious norms.

Regarding the writer's religious education, Fergus Jan underlines the importance of religious education in Jane Austen's family, and the religious content of her works: "Religious teaching began at home as the foundation for everything else.... For Austen, religion was an essential part of daily life... Her works are deeply religious in this sense, although she deliberately avoided overt religious instruction" (Fergus,1991:36).

Along the same reasoning, Janet Todd stresses the role of the Anglican Church in the society of Austen's novels, and her acceptance of the traditional values preached: "These would encompass both piety and social realism: a man's entering the Church could result from vocation or simply family tradition and simply access to patronage. Austen accepted the divine mission and implication of the Church but also its worldly function as a national institution" (Todd,2015:16).

If religion is part of women's education, then Austen acknowledges the extant traditional perceptions, and contributes a comparatively progressive outlook regarding the content of women's education – a way to improve their own individual status and regard in society, rather than marrying to advance in class. The progressive note is better reflected in her later novels, in which she demonstrates the women's ability to take charge and change the situations they find themselves in. According to Barry Roth, "education's aims include instilling a sense of one's duty and the ability to behave rationally, as well as inculcating wisdom, good breeding, and learning . . . she identifies self-knowledge as education's primary end" (Roth,1993:112).

The Realism of a Romantic novelist

Jane Austen's realism has been the subject of extended debates, due to the scarcity of realistic physical descriptions. Thus, Norman Page, in *The Language of Jane Austen* notes not only the "conspicuous absence of words referring to physical perception, the world of shape and colour and sensuous response," but also finds some defining qualities of Austen's use of language, such as "the recurrence of a relatively small number of frequently-used words, mainly epithets and abstract nouns indicating personal qualities – qualities, that is, of character and temperament rather than outward appearance" (Page 1972:54-55). Again, the physical description is at its lowest. It is her choice of language that allows readers to feel a personal attachment to the characters, which they seem to know "intimately as a *mind*" (Page,1972:56-57).

Jane Austen, as a novelist, could not possibly avoid the concreteness of the world around – a novel is about concrete human beings performing their daily duties in the material world. It explains why her characters are "particular people in particular places," and she is less interested in the "material solidity and circumstantiality of this world" (Page,1972:56). Janet Todd considers the connection that the writer establishes between her readers and the characters in her novels as a clear mark of realism: "Austen creates an illusion of realism in her texts, partly through readily identification with the characters and partly through rounded characters, who have a history and a memory" (Todd 2015:28).

When the analysis moves to the depth of Austen's characters, critics disagree. Marilyn Butler, for instance, does not define Jane Austen as a realist simply because she has no intention to portray the female protagonists' psychology. To her, Austen is a polemicist against sensibility, arguing that she "chooses to omit the sensuous, the irrational, [and] the involuntary types of mental experience because, although she cannot

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deny their existence, she disapproves of them.” (Butler 2002:294-95) Actually, before Jane Austen published her first novel, the realist tradition in English literature had already been initiated by Sir Walter Scott and Mary Edgeworth. According to Gary Kelly,

“Novelists such as Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Jane Porter, and Walter Scott appropriated elements from historiography, popular literature, social studies, and political economy in order to represent various kinds of relationship between 'national' history, identity, and destiny and the individual and the local community” (Kelly 1997: 152).

William Scott even wrote a laudatory review of *Emma*, in which he greatly appreciated Jane Austen and situated it in the new novelistic style, entirely different from the previous one, replacing the pictures of romantic affection and sensibility: “The substitute for these excitements... was the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him” (Scott,1968:67). However, Galperin’s opinion is that Austen could not have been a realist writer in the nineteenth-century assumption of the term because “such practice was by no means stable at the moment that Austen is believed to have ushered it into full being” (Galperin,2003:19). To him, Austen is a picturesque writer on the peak of realism. In her narratives, “reality and temporality are admixed so that Austen’s status as an historian of the everyday [...] turns out to be an unusually precise description of her achievement” (Galperin,2003:31).

One further argument is offered by John Wiltshire who, in his *Jane Austen and the Body: The Picture of Health* (1992), argues that the references to illness and death in Austen’s novels differ from the realist tradition: whereas in a realist text the health of the protagonist is “an absence” while the “eccentrically ill (or injured, or deformed) are articulated into prominence” (Wiltshire 1992:8), in Austen’s novels “the physical well-being of her figures is, on the contrary, at issue: embodiment ... is an important given of their life-worlds” (Wiltshire 1992:8-9).

Literary Agency and Social Vision

Jane Austen’s novels are more depth than her contemporary, she structures her social mechanics around the concept of ideal family communities, a pioneering social and moral power to coexist and guide each other through life. Austen addresses educated minds and who to build a better future.

In the nineteenth century, critics noted the connection between feminine and feminine intent. That is, Jane Austen arranged her novels with a kind of romance and accurately worked out. Scientists were able to prove that Austen, through her analysis of the character, was able to demonstrate that Emma likewise reported on her own experience, as well as demonstrated that her free and indirect style of consciousness reveals the importance of personalities with inner thoughts.

Different scholars evaluate the way in which Austen helps to use the free, indirect method in its display of ridicule, and others demonstrate that Austen reflects the individual and collective opinion through gossip in the novel.

In *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* some interpreters see Austen's awareness of feminine equality in thought and the place of deprivation in society, the masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* is a special societal creative writing exposes social themes, like pride, prejudice, love and marriage, the unity of family, interdependence, wealth, and

social status. Pride is a persistent attendance in the attitudes of the characters, especially in the treatment of each other through the central man character, Darcy. Darcy's social status make him pride and look down on anyone not in his class, he demonstrated this during his proposal to Elizabeth, he struggles against his feelings because he shame of Elizabeth's family, but by the events the couples Darcy and Elizabeth overcome and help each other to realize their faults. Jane Austen uses Darcy to show how pride can damage even love, and at the same time there is a deep message not to be dependent greatly on our own verdicts. Prejudice refers to the tendency to change the character's faith and verdicts into prejudgment and harm. The theme is presented mostly through Elizabeth, her early judgements on Darcy and Wickham are wrong, at the beginning, she thinks Wickham as charming and handsome, but through the time, she finds him diverse of what he seems. In spite of Darcy's self-exaltation, and prideful, Elizabeth sees him superior. Jane Austen presents prejudice as stage in one's moral development, and this person can vanquish it by considerations.

Pride and Prejudice is straightforwardly about marriage –this theme determines the novel structure and drama even more than in the case on other novels. It is the most classical love story of all the novels, and marriage are presented in different ways, and exposes the problem of how to accommodate love within conventions of marriage, the opening line introduce marriage with its conventional terms of money and situations, but by the novel's events, Austen can prove that money and wealth cannot change a person's passions, and neither passion nor conventional suit abilities alone are sufficient for lasting love and happy marriage. Austen's technique for allowing the reader to become intimately acquainted with her main characters illustrates by Darryl Jones

“Austen structures her fiction according to circulating novels' formulas and strategies. In libraries and their catalogs, these novels become part of a public literary collection featuring tales of love in elite settings, a happy ending in the form of a marriage, and the fulfillment of readerly expectations. In her plots, characterization, organization, and narrative strategies of intertextuality, tonal fluidity, and self-consciousness, Austen underscores her obedience to them.” (Jones,2004:12).

Austin's Feminism – not yet theoretical

To a modern readership, the feminist approach to her works seems to be the most suitable when one considers the extent to which feminist themes are easily discernible: the extent to which some her women characters have the power to confront the society they live in and finally take charge of their own fate, while others are narrowed down – both physically and spiritually – to the general accepted norms. Actually, in her posthumous novel *Northanger Abbey* she explains her position as a writer as follows:

“I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding – joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally takes up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust” (*Northanger Abbey*:30).

On a theoretical level, Jane Austen's belonging to feminist literature has preoccupied the critics since the beginnings of theoretical feminism in the 1970s.

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At a closer analysis, eighteenth-century feminism had two main components: one conservative component, according to which “women were treated as an inferior class in a man’s world” (Butler,2002:23), and an Enlightenment component. According to the representatives of the former, such as Mary Astell and Dorothy Wordsworth, “women are urged to counter this discrimination through moral and spiritual self-cultivation and charitable service to the family and community” (Butler,2002:23). Butler’s argument in favour of Austen’s belonging to the conservative (or Tory) feminism is her stylistic and thematic affinity to the writings of Maria Edgeworth (Butler,2002:23)

Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft belong to the Enlightenment feminism which, according to Margaret Kirkham, claims that “women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their conduct” (Kirkham,1983:84). Contrary to Butler’s previous statement, Margaret Kirkham brings arguments against it, contending that Austen’s protagonists “do not adore or worship their husbands, though they respect and love them. They are not, especially in the later novels, allowed to get married at all until the heroes have provided convincing evidence of appreciating their qualities of mind, and of accepting their power of rational judgement, as well as their good hearts” (Kirkham,1983:84).

Austen’s women are women thinking and living in a shared domestic space, not very much different from the living room in her family home where she wrote her novels, which was quite unusual, according to her nephew James who wondered: “How she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to retire to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions” (Austen-Leigh, 2009:128-29). As a result of this lack of privacy, Jane hid her manuscripts from the eyes of visiting relatives or friends. In their influential feminist readings, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that this surreptitious gesture speaks to Austen’s “ladylike” guilt about authorship (Gilbert& Gubar,1984:101). It is a surprising behaviour, that may be better understood as a desire for privacy that is not unconditionally opposed to the presence of others; that speaks to the self’s ability to match varying degrees of withdrawal into itself with varying degrees of hospitality toward others.

While many of the claims of Gilbert and Gubar’s influential *The Madwoman in the Attic* have been contested by more recent poststructuralist feminist criticism, their study nonetheless clearly exemplifies a historical and continued investment by feminist criticism in the symbolism of solitude. As the title of *The Madwoman in the Attic* suggests, for Gilbert and Gubar it is Charlotte Brontë rather than Jane Austen who anticipates later feminist sensibilities, by directing us away from the conformity of the drawing room and into the mysteries of the secluded attic, a symbol of untraversed female psyche.

Seclusion is also a theme of a still earlier text of feminism, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), the title of which refers pointedly to Austen. Yet for Woolf, unlike many later feminist readers, Austen’s place in a tradition of writing by and about women is profoundly unclear – since she exemplifies at once the absence of a room of one’s own and the possession of a sentence of one’s very own, described by Woolf as a woman’s sentence.

While Woolf treats Austen as a peculiar exception in a tradition where the demands of authorship and sociality would appear to be widely divergent, her insight

that the woman artist's "sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room" (Woolf 1929:116) anticipates a feminist reading of Austen's work that does not too readily dismiss the culture of the drawing room. This culture includes not only the constraints of politeness but also training in "attention" to others: learning to see others as participants in a dialogue, representatives of standpoints that are not identical to one's own but that are productively engaged in determining one's standpoint.

For example, in *Sense and Sensibility* Austen is keen to establish connections not only between one's own standpoint and those of others, between private and public reason, but also between the seemingly distinct vocabularies of love and judgment. Elinor's speech about Edward Ferrars reveals not only Elinor's judgment of Edward's character and her appreciation of his looks but also her feelings for him. The vocabularies of love and judgment coexist side by side because the kind of judgment she is concerned with is the judgment exercised in the context of intimate relationships. Elinor and Marianne show themselves to be good judges primarily insofar as they choose their husbands wisely.

While Austen, unlike feminist theorists today, does not articulate a clear role for women outside the family, she does reinscribe family relations as relations requiring both love and justice. Her understanding of marriage in particular as companionate marriage rather than the "elective affinity" of the culture of sensibility imports the vocabulary of reason, judgment, and justice into the private sphere, complicating in the process the dualism of separate spheres.

Commenting on the dialectic of reason and emotion brought into play in Austen's understanding of marriage, Julia Prewitt Brown suggestively argues that Austen reinscribes romantic love as "cognitive love" (Brown, 1979:43). Given the cognitive dimension that Austen attributes to love, her understanding of marriage can be compared to that of Mary Wollstonecraft; as Susan Mendus observes in her *Feminism and Emotion: Readings in Moral and Political Philosophy* (2000), Wollstonecraft questioned the doctrine of separate spheres through her inscription moral relations, requiring both reason and emotion.

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Sensibility:333), because she is perceived by the narrator as having a considerable and unexploited fund of talent for membership in the larger community.

Jane Austen's novels are all about the female protagonist becoming a woman. Gubar and Gilbert explain the process as following: "Whereas becoming a man means proving or testing oneself or earning a vocation, becoming a woman means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide" (Gilbert&Gubar,1984:154). For Mary and Louisa, two of the female characters of *Persuasion*, the process of growing up is "a fall from freedom, autonomy, and strength into debilitating, degrading, ladylike dependency" (Gilbert&Gubar,1984:177). The two critics are categorical in this respect: "While Louisa's physical fall and subsequent illness reinforce Anne's belief that female assertion and impetuosity must be fatal, they also return us to the elegiac autumnal landscape that reflects Anne's sense of her own diminishment, the loss she experiences since her story is "now nothing" (Gilbert&Gubar,1984:177).

A Postcolonial perspective: Austen's "dead silence"

Analyzing Jane Austen's work, postcolonial critics found relevant instances in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* that allowed for a wide palette of interpretations of the role of colonialism. Here is an excerpt:

"...You are one of those who are too silent in the evening circle."

'But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?'

'I did – and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired further.'

'And I longed to do it – but *there was such a dead silence!* (*Mansfield Park*:136)

No one but Fanny has the courage to ask a question about the slave trade, with all its connotations for the Mansfield Park property. Nobody of the family circle present is able or willing to offer an answer; Austen does not go any further, and Fanny does not possess the stamina necessary to pursue her question and break the "dead silence" that followed. The harmony and cohesion of the domestic circle is not disturbed. Said interpreted the silence as evidence that "one world [the overseas possessions] could not be connected with the other [the quiet British countryside manor] since there simply is no common language for both" (Said 1994:96).

Irrespective of his seemingly unending conversations about the West Indies, Sir Thomas is in reality unable and unwilling to answer her question simply because his possessions in Antigua ensure the safety and comfort of the family in Mansfield Park, eager to gather in the tranquillity of the drawing room and listen to his stories. Even Fanny acknowledges his gift as a story teller: "The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together." She also observes of her uncle that "he values the very quietness" and that "the repose of his own family-circle is all he wants" (Said 1994:135). As things stand, any unwanted questions about colonization and the slave trade would surely disturb such repose.

With the authority of his position, Edward Said – in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) – demonstrates that Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in its insistence on the relationships between the British and Antiguan estates, is suggestive for the relation between periphery and the centre of the British Empire:

"[In *Mansfield Park*] Thomas Bertram's slave plantation in Antigua is mysteriously necessary to the poise and the beauty of Mansfield Park, a place described

in moral and aesthetic terms well before the scramble for Africa, or before the age of empire officially began” (Said 1994:56).

The critics’ reactions were not late to follow. Ferguson, for instance, draws a parallel between the women of *Mansfield Park* and the slaves in Antigua: “...gender relations at home parallel and echo traditional relationships between the colonialists and colonized peoples: European women ... mark silent African-Caribbean rebels as well as their own disenfranchisement, class and gender victimization” (Ferguson,1991:118). On the other hand, Susan Fraiman challenges Said when she identifies elements anti-imperialism in Austen’s criticism of provinciality, and concludes that, “As a symbol ... slavery in *Mansfield Park* is far less incidental and inadvertent than Said suggests”, and she considers a certain “imagined commonality” between Austen’s English women and the African slaves, which is “a potentially radical overlap of courage” (Fraiman,1995:813).

On the other hand, if imperial colonialism had a distinct geographical form and well defined borders, winning the independence generated a series of ambiguities. Even if the former colonies won their own governments and administration, the break with the past was far from final.

They preserved that peculiar mixture of continuity and change that connects the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods in one single area of investigation, to which the difficulty to recognize, integrate and reflect their own ethno-cultural diversity was added. The frontiers of the postcolonial world are no longer political or linguistic only; they have become imaginative, based upon imagologic stereotypes. Said himself provides the answer to the “dead silence” when he concludes: “In time there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central to a new understanding of what Europe was” (Fraiman,1995:813). It is a remark which, two years later, at a conference of the Jane Austen Society of North America, prompted Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara to add: “That time is now. At this conference we do indeed have the language to discuss slavery, property, the British Empire, and Antiguan and British readers of *Mansfield Park*. I would argue that if Jane Austen were writing *Mansfield Park* today, she could not have resisted or avoided making ironic connections between Antigua and Mansfield Park of which she was so aware in 1814” (Kuwahara,1995:107).

Conclusions

There are different approaches to the modernity of Jane Austen’s work. Her narratives revolve around the daily life of the late eighteenth-century English gentry, offering a woman’s perspective on a patriarchal society through the lens of Romanticism. Austen’s novels provide a succinct social history not without comment, critique and humour. Her female characters in particular broke traditional moulds and continue to be some of the most celebrated in literary history. Despite the strict social constraints imposed on them they are strong, funny, clever, bold, brave and ultimately flawed in their own way, yet they are all, generally, rewarded with the greatest triumph women of the time could enjoy, a happy marriage.

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