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The “Bisexual” World of Jane Austen

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Recent critics, many of whom cannot see in Jane Austen's novels the forest for the trees, have commented on the terrible limitations her settings impose upon her plots. It never occurs to them that this supposed idiosyncrasy of hers is a very handy way to distinguish the “novel” from the epic and romance: suddenly, toward the end of the eighteenth century, a new literary genre emerged which was not so much about “action” as it was about “behavior.” And the chief constraint upon action (plot) in the prose works that followed this new pattern was the environment (setting). Gone was the sense of cosmic significance in the deeds of men—the Olympian audience and the medieval court had absented themselves from the “picture of real life and manners” in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it was science, and perhaps it was democracy; but something, certainly, lowered the ceilings on transcendence and flattened the world view that had conceived of action in epical or romantic proportions. So, this “limitation” of Jane Austen is actually a remarkable insight: the trivial, banal, domesticated world with which she deals is, quantitatively, the larger world of human experience. Most people's lives and fortunes *are* determined by drawing-room conversations and fireside flirtations. That she has been faulted and called a “feminine” writer because she concerned herself with these is a hangover

from an epical bias which the facts of nineteenth-century life do not sustain. True, hers is not a particularly "masculine" world. But it is also true that that world had long since disappeared, and it was into a world very much like Jane Austen's that men would have to learn to fit.

Unlike most English novelists, whether male or female, Jane Austen creates a fictional world that transcends the traditional sexual stereotypes. The amazing thing about all those critics who complain that she didn't discuss the Napoleonic Wars is that they never seem to notice that she didn't talk much about childbearing either. There are hardly any differences between men and women in her work, although they court one another incessantly. A personality trait ascribed to a woman in one novel is associated with a man in the next. (Obvious example: Emma's pride, as well as her reaction to people and things generally, is remarkably like Darcy's in *Pride and Prejudice*.) Maleness and femaleness as distinct cultural or biological characteristics simply do not involve her.

Unfortunately, it has long been assumed that these did not involve her because of a certain country spinster's ingenuousness, a naivete about the wider world of sexual politics that Mary Ann Evans experienced. Because biographical material is so meagre, researchers have had to content themselves with idle speculation about whether or not a certain gentleman she met at Bath ever proposed to her before he died. All of which has only contributed to a common assumption that nothing much ever happened to Jane Austen, and that she must be presumed to have led a very narrow and provincial life.

But there ought to be something at least vaguely suspect about all those letters her sister Cassandra took pains to burn, especially in the light of the ones she kept. The only ones that remain are extraordinarily thin in thought and adolescent in style. Apparently their very fatuity is what saved them for posterity, which could suggest that the others must have communicated a bit more than sisterly chat about the dress she wore for the last ball.

Jane Austen has been diminished through decades of damning apologies like Francis Warre Cornish's, that Jane lived "in a society where small differences are remarked . . . and [developed] a keen sense of what niceness means. . . . Attention to dress means attention to decency."¹ Nor did her

nephew-biographer, J. E. Austen-Leigh, contribute very much with his quarrel with some obscure and catty contemporaries of his aunt, a certain Miss Mitford and her mother (the first of whom described Jane as "a poker," while the other called her "a butterfly"). All that Austen-Leigh reveals about his aunt is that the family apparently decided she must never be thought of as Elizabeth Bennet.

Even well into the twentieth century, critics kept making much of the fact that only once in her whole life had Jane Austen ventured as far as two hundred miles from the country curacy between Steventon and Deane where she had been born. Admirers like Virginia Woolf keep remarking about the awful hindrances Austen had to overcome—how she had to write on small scraps of paper so she could hide her manuscripts under the blotter when anyone came into the room—as though the genius of her work were not in its merits, *per se*, but in the sheer effort required of her to write novels at all.

Virginia Woolf's whole thrust on behalf of Jane Austen is that *War and Peace* could never have been written if Tolstoi had had to put up with those drawing-room interruptions. But that argument is just defensive indignation lending more weight to the premise that the index of greatness for a writer in the early nineteenth century was in chronicling the Napoleonic Wars. It betrays in Virginia Woolf a very male bias, or at least a certain emotional complicity with the world of men.

With all due deference to Tolstoi, what was so compelling about the Napoleonic Wars anyhow? Napoleon himself was an anachronism, a Corsican megalomaniac whose caesarian excursions belonged to a medieval culture that wasn't the least "contemporary" with the reality of most people in Regency England. His aspirations were certainly the stuff that epics and romances were made of, but Jane Austen was innovating a different genre—the "novel of manners." And it was this genre, far more than the "novels" of Scott or the mock epics of Fielding, that was for nearly a century to be the major form in English literature.

Jane Austen knew enough about contemporary society to see a certain irony in the Napoleonic stance. When the librarian to the Prince Regent suggested that she write a historical romance based on the Hanoverian dynasty, she answered with characteristic wryness:

I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit down seriously to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or at other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.²

What Austen is confessing is not so much an incapacity as a disinclination for writing epics or romances. But still, that she was genuinely and importantly inclined toward the contemporary mood of her age seems incontestable; and she is beginning to get recognition for it in recent criticism of her work.

Mark Schorer, for example, still finds it remarkable that she didn't mention those Napoleonic Wars, but at least he grants that there *were* other issues. He notes how aware George Eliot was of "the great world" and "historical events"; but he adds that there was also the sociological happening of a "great intellectual and economic shift in consciousness and status."³ And this is, of course, precisely the *metier* of Jane Austen's "novels of manners."

In a tabulation of "buried and dead metaphors that persist in her work," Schorer illustrates how aware Jane Austen was of the economics of class. There are metaphors of social scale, such as high/low, sink/rise, advance/decline, superior/inferior, that describe the vagaries of rank and fortune, of power and command. Her prose bristles with references to money, to business and property, to number and measure (add, divide, multiply, calculate, how much and how little, more and less). And very often she makes "matter" analogies (like "encumbrance") that deal with weight or substance, or refers to things as "material," i.e., "material change" or "material alteration".⁴

What Austen is up to, Schorer suggests, is finding some kind of readjustment—some perspective, some internal balance from which to make moral judgments on social facts.⁵ He says:

A large portion of Jane Austen's comedy arises from the discrepancy that we see here, from the tension between these two kinds of value, these different *scales*, material and moral, which the characters, like the metaphors, are all the time juxtaposing and equating.⁶

But of course, no tension resides merely in "society." There is always an equivalent anxiety within individuals, struggling to find some kind of social identity in a culture with two kinds of value. According to Lionel Trilling, this ego-anxiety is passed onto Jane Austen's readers. He insists that it is difficult for a reader to make a merely literary judgment about her novels because there is something there that calls into question one's own character, personality and relationship to society.⁷ "Not to like Jane Austen," Trilling says facetiously, "is to put oneself under suspicion of a general personal inadequacy and even—let us face it—of a want of breeding."⁸

Although Trilling seems only to be half-serious with that remark, he has put his finger on one of the most important talents Jane Austen had—that she could make the reader's experience a perfect analogue to the characters'. A feeling of general personal inadequacy, one that has something to do with "a want of breeding," is the psychological impetus for most of the situations she develops. Her novels have a consciousness not unlike Henry James's: they both write tragedies of the *faux pas*. He is the master, and she the mistress, of the Invidious Distinction. Snobbery runs rampant in both their works; sometimes it is attacked through irony, but often it reaches way beyond comic irony, and always it has the sturdy force of a "given" in the schema of social realities. So no matter how egalitarian readers feel themselves to be, some of the smuggeries seem to be valid—if only because we have felt the weight of them operating against ourselves.

For instance, Jane Austen expected us to disapprove of Emma's snobbery, and yet the nexus of that arrogance lay in the importance of being "nice"—in its older connotation of "discriminating." We value the discerning eye, the refined taste, and we tend to agree with Emma's complaint against Mr. Weston, who invited everyone at one time or another to help him decorate the inn for the ball:

[Emma] liked his open manners, but a little less of open-heartedness would have made him a higher character. General benevolence, but not general friendship, make a man what he ought to be.

Still, it is all so subtle. In Jane Austen, as in Henry James, moral value does not have a strong, recognizable color of its own. It is a shade, a nuance,

a tonal quality that the reader sees through the prism of social custom. The moral center of the book seems never to be grounded in one character, but in a set of personalities; and it exists in them only as somehow differentiated light rays until that prism of society can make a color gradation of them all. Then we can see that some are merely lavender-gray, while others are deep violet, and we learn to care about some shades more. We learn to be, in Austen's own word, "nice"—in other words, we gradually make a value system of our own subtle discernment.

The "shades" that Jane Austen herself preferred are nowhere clearly evident, but there seems to be a key in this innocuous passage from her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*:

It was very much the case with the chief of their visitors, who almost all laboured under one or the other of these disqualifications for being agreeable—want of sense, either natural or improved, want of elegance, want of spirits, or want of temper.

Afterward, in her major novels, she seems to be trying to define what she means by superior "sense," superior "elegance," superior "spirit and temper."

In *Persuasion* she defines "sense":

There is a quickness of perception in some, a nicety in the discernment of character, a natural penetration, in short, which no experience in others can equal.

And elsewhere in that same novel she explains "want of spirits and temper":

Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend on the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped.

Then, in *Emma*, in the character of Jane Fairfax, we have a paradigm of "elegance"—refinement mixed with superior accomplishment. Significantly, *Emma* is Jane Austen's most nearly political book; and "elegance" plays a

political role. It operates against the incursion of the "democratic" assumptions of a capitalist, nouveau-riche class who assumed that the sort of refinement and degree of accomplishment which Jane Fairfax possessed were accessible to mere money. Mrs. Elton, representing the moneyed class, is shown to be extraordinarily smug and class-conscious, as well as vulgar; according to the British critic Cornish, "The presumption of [her] claiming equality with Emma was portentous." Like Cornish, many British critics emphasize Mrs. Elton's vulgarity. Americans, like Trilling, who are used to thinking of democracy as more or less of a value, emphasize the trait she has in common with Emma—her snobbery. In fact, Trilling treats Mrs. Elton as a kind of foil to Emma in this respect, asserting that Emma's snobbery is shown against the background of Mrs. Elton's in order to illustrate that it is a far more insidious smugness because it is "principled snobbery."

The discriminations that Jane Austen makes may be almost as "nice" as Emma's own inveterate snobberies, but they are centered in something different from the sturdy faith in some exterior standard of wealth or familial connection. For all Emma's smugness, her real weakness, in Jane Austen's eyes, appears to be that she is not properly proud. Emma raised Harriet Smith to a higher social rank on the presumption that her anonymous father must be wealthy (a perhaps valid assumption that the lower classes either abandoned, or lived unembarrassed—culturally speaking—with their bastards). Yet Emma patronized and even snubbed the far more accomplished Jane Fairfax, whom she admits is very "elegant," but is, unfortunately, poor.

The trouble with Emma is that she has absorbed some of the "new" values, values which are corrupting the ranking system of an older age. Mr. Knightley, as his name suggests, belongs to the ancient order; and it was an order that measured personal merit on an old-fashioned scale of interior values that had only an oblique relationship to material things like the barouche-landau Mrs. Elton keeps bragging about.

As Cornish notes, he is "the most attractive of Jane Austen's heroes," and is shown as having "higher feeling, keener observation, and finer tact than anyone in the book." Interestingly, there is one exchange in which Emma testifies to her own higher feeling about personal status in regard to him: she

compliments Knightley for having come to Randalls in a carriage.

"This is coming as you should do," said she; "like a gentleman. I am quite glad to see you."

He thanked her, observing, "How lucky that we should arrive at the same moment; for, if we had met first in the drawing-room, I doubt whether you would have distinguished how I came by my look or manner."

"Yes, I should, I am sure I should. There is always a look of consciousness or bustle when people come in a way which they know is beneath them. You think you carry it off very well, I dare say; but with you it is a sort of bravado, an air of affected unconcern; I always observe it whenever I meet you under those circumstances. *Now* you have nothing to try for. You are not afraid of being ashamed. You are not striving to look taller than anybody else. *Now* I shall really be happy to walk into the same room with you."

"Nonsensical girl!" was his reply, but not at all in anger.

Usually Knightley *is* made angry by Emma's nonsensical distinctions. This time he is not because there *is* something in what she says: there is a kind of superiority that is "not afraid of being ashamed"—and it is called moral courage.

In the days of the epic and romance, moral courage was exercised in deeds of derring-do, and shame and pride were usually the stuff of tragedy. If, in Jane Austen, these seem to be evoked by, and to issue in, trivial circumstances, they are no less important as psychological realities. To call her novels "tragedies of the *faux pas*" is not to diminish their consequence at all. Especially since it is of prime importance to any cultural history that there was, at the time she wrote, so very little else to feel proud or ashamed of besides one's rank in English country society. Knightley, because of his higher feeling, keener observation, and finer tact, embodies all that is best in the Idea of the Gentleman; but the fact still remains that there is absolutely nothing for him to do. Gentlemen merely "behave"; they do not "act." The Idea of the Gentleman seems to have been a theme for English novels only after the Idea of the Hero had become extinct. For men like George Knightley, moral courage is "exercised" in a kind of static and stoic composure: he is complimented for "not striving to look taller"—which is a kind of antithesis of the classical hero's posture.

Similarly, Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* explains the demoralizing idleness that it was incumbent upon an English gentleman to practice:

"But unfortunately my own nicety and the nicety of my friends, have made me what I am, an idle, helpless being. We never could agree in our choice of a profession. I always preferred the church, as I still do. But that was not smart enough for my family."

With some measure of irony (they had been "smart enough" for her own father and brothers), Jane Austen scrupulously notes that the "professions"—the church and the army—are "out." Although George Knightley is a far stronger figure than Edward Ferrars, he is not, essentially, better off. The future of the landed aristocracy to which he belongs is pictured in the sort of elegant collapse of his family estate, Donwell Abbey. There is still some nostalgia attached to the land and the feudal camaraderie of Knightley and his man, Robert Martin. But even the apple and strawberry yield is not what it once was, and Knightley can hardly afford his carriage.

Worse off, of course, is Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father. Although still catered to by the townspeople as the nominal patriarch of Hartfield, he seems to represent all that is most ineffectual and effete in the life style of the aristocracy. Neurotically disabled with anxieties about his health, he dissipates what little energy he has in avoiding drafts. Psychologically he cannot bear the least alteration in the pattern of his life, and physically he seems on the point of annihilation by the common cold. His home, Hartfield House, has no land to speak of, and he has no male heirs. Although Emma will survive him, it seems he can hardly even take credit for having produced her: over and over again he remarks that she is "her mother's daughter" because she is so unlike him.

Although the whole old order seems to be yielding place to new in *Emma*, Jane Austen's own political attitudes are not very clear. She seems to have been very sensitive to both the good and the bad of feudal politics and values, and was sharply satiric about the rise of "new" families and the social claims of the bourgeoisie; but in *Pride and Prejudice* she was very sympathetic to the Gardiners, who were firmly attached to the middle-class life style of the industrial cities. It was not really the class struggle that in-

terested her, but "the nature of the deep psychological change which accompanied the establishment of democratic society," Lionel Trilling says. "She was aware of the increase of the psychological burden of the individual, she understood the new necessity of conscious self-definition and self-criticism, of the need to make private judgments of reality."⁹

For all the political threads and economic metaphors one finds in a novel like *Emma*, the direction is distinctly personal. As a work of fiction it stands alone as a *tour de force* of stylistic manipulation of narrative point of view: the reader is now inside, now outside Emma's consciousness—and forced to judge the limits of her perception in a way the usual third-person narrative does not encourage. Not even a first-person narrative could submit a character to the kind of naked isolation in which Emma stands, because the whole external world takes on the configuration of the "I's" point of view. In *Emma*, the world of the novel resists her point of view, and the reader can see the process of her coming to terms with the boundaries and limits of her ego in a way that no first-person retrospective could show. It is because of its technique, probably, that Trilling asserts that *Emma* is more difficult than Proust, or Joyce, or Kafka. And, as a result of its extraordinary technique, the character of Emma emerges as a very different heroine from any that emerges from George Eliot's or Charlotte Brontë's work. Trilling is among the few to note the difference:

There is a great power of charm in self-love, although to be sure, the charm is an ambiguous one. We resent it and resist it, yet we are drawn by it, if only it goes with a little grace or creative power. But we distinguish between our response to the self-love of women. No woman could have won the forgiveness that has been so willingly given (after due condemnation) to the self-regard of, say, Yeats and Shaw. We understand self-love to be part of the moral life of all men; in men of genius we expect it to appear in unusual intensity and we take it to be an essential element of their power. The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life. And she doesn't have it as a special instance, as an example of a new kind of woman, which is the way George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke has her moral life, but quite as a matter of course, as a given quality of her nature.¹⁰

Perhaps Virginia Woolf had noticed the same thing—if not quite as explicitly—when she reserved a special category of intellectual independence for Jane Austen and Emily Brontë.¹¹ It seems clear in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, at least, that part of that independence issues in Catherine Earnshaw's declaration "I am Heathcliff," since there are very few women characters in English novels who dare assert that kind of psychic congruity with a man. Jane Austen, like Emily Brontë, seems to ignore gender distinctions, while most authors—men and women alike—make a point of sexual differences. For example, George Eliot's women are handicapped by female stereotypes, and, in trying to work out of them—in exercising their moral life—they are oppressed by society. They manage at best to effect a kind of reconciliation, a compromise of the self, the ego, to accommodate the social order. The epilogue to *Middlemarch* reads like a paean to mediocrity: the Dorothea whom the reader grows attached to, and suffers for, is the Dorothea whose soul is too large for Casaubon's narrow intellectual pursuits, and whose sensibility is strangled by the confining range of opportunities opened to her. The reader hopes that Will Ladislaw will liberate her, and finds the unleashed, uninhibited force of the rain storm "dashing against the window-panes" as they finally kiss a symbol for that liberation. After all, water imagery attains to the level of a motif in *Middlemarch*, beginning with the famous description of Casaubon:

Hence he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge that his stream would afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion.

So it is that the reader is prepared to sneer at the "sprinklers" and applaud the "plungers" for the rest of the novel. Yet George Eliot writes in the "Finale" that Fred Vincy has found happiness writing about turnips and mangelwurtzel in a pamphlet "which won him high congratulations at agricultural meetings." And of Dorothea we learn, "Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had

no great name on the earth."

Only in her very first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, does Jane Austen seem to make an adjustment like that for her heroine and hero. When Edward Ferrars finally enters the church and marries Elinor, what motivates him is good sense. But as Mark Schorer suggests, even in this early work Jane Austen seems to find a certain irony in "good sense" as a principle of action, and Edward and Elinor Ferrars stand outside the central movement of Jane Austen's psychology.

Jane Austen's female protagonists still make sensible matches, but their moral courage no longer resides in repressing their spirit and temper by rational deliberation at every turn. They make mistakes, but, all in all, the world in which they live is comfortable for them. Women are certainly not more oppressed than men. Of them all, Anne Elliot, the heroine of Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, is one of the meekest; yet, drawn into a debate with Captain Harville about which sex is more fickle, she can speak of the disadvantages women suffer from without the least rancor:

Captain Harville: "Songs and proverbs all talk of woman's fickleness. But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men."

Anne Elliott: "Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything."

There is something of quiet amusement in the style of Anne Elliot's response. She merely sustains politely the point that Captain Harville himself has made, without feeling any special need to carry off the "highly ornamental pot." Her own suffering has had very little to do with the degree to which she has been educated, or any oppression visited upon her because she is a woman. She had just been too susceptible to "*persuasion*" in rejecting a lover.

Mark Schorer maintains that the cruel economics of marriage is Jane Austen's persistent concern in all her work. But certainly it is not a cruelty for her women. They always have the possibility of rising in social status through marriage: Jane Fairfax may marry Frank Churchill, and Elizabeth

Bennet may marry Darcy. But, when a woman of higher social class marries a "nobody," she automatically descends to his "circumstances"—he never rises to hers. The position of men in the social ladder is permanently fixed. Mr. Weston married a Churchill, but remained a poor member of the militia, while his bride pined away and died because of the "reduced circumstances" into which her marriage had dragged her. The child of this unfortunate union, Frank, is the only exception to the general rule that men stay within the caste of their birth, and he must forfeit his identity—abandon his father and change his name—in order to benefit from his association with the higher members of the social scale.

It seems small wonder that the Idea of the Hero had died in the democratized but not classless society of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The whole measure of the hero is taken in his ability to rise: Achilles could stir Zeus, Lancelot could impress Arthur. A hero's stature has always been related to the attention his affairs commanded from those beings above him. In the "cruel economics" of democracy in Regency England there were no Olympian gods; there was only a rigidly stratified class system that gave man no chance to rise above his station.

The economic metaphors in Jane Austen merely outline the paradox of the new status-index; money won't buy sense, or elegance, and it tends to blunt spirit and temper. Hers is not a "feminine" world, it is just a world of masculine conflict seen with an ironist's eye: a world in which physical conflict had been reduced to a struggle to maintain or attain social position. The enthusiasm with which an individual enters into a conflict of this kind is in inverse proportion to his "sense," and the men in her novels whom we learn to value most are somehow outside, or above the struggle.

Women are historically outside the struggle, and this is what puts them so close to the moral center of Jane Austen's world. The distinct thing about them, the thing that makes them different from George Eliot's women for example, is that they seem never to have been conceived as a counterpart to the male hero. Their moral life, that Trilling noticed they have "as a matter of course," does not evolve in confrontation with the external, social world—except in digging in the heels of the Self against the force of that world's persuasion.

In other works of the nineteenth century, women would be heroines who could "save" men, or villainous characters who threatened men, or dark, peripheral *personnages* who, nevertheless, worked some mysterious influence over the course of things. But nowhere else are they quite what they are in Jane Austen—fully realized egos who do not require a function within the world of men in order to define themselves. Jane Austen's women are not antitheses to anything at all, and the world of her novels is neither "female," nor "male," but completely bisexual in a way that the world of most novelists since Austen, herself, is not.

Notes

1. See *Jane Austen* (London, 1929), p. 69.
2. Quoted by Francis Warre Cornish from J. E. Austen-Leigh: A letter to Mr. Clarke, librarian at Carlton House.
3. Mark Schorer, Introduction to *Emma*, Laurel Edition (New York, 1961), p. 5.
4. Schorer, p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
7. Lionel Trilling, Introduction to *Emma*, Riverside Edition (Boston, 1957), pp. v-vi.
8. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
9. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.
10. *Ibid.*, p. x.
11. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 130.