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JANE AUSTEN'S CLERGYMEN:
FACT OR FICTION?

143

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
and the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Victoria K. Corey
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Accepted for the faculty of the College of
Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts.

Ralph M. Wandle - English
Chairman Department

Graduate Committee

Robert O. Harper - English
Name Department

Thomas P. Walsh - Eng.

Harold Adams DeLatom - History

George Astling (Sec)

Biographical Background

The sustenance and the life that produced the novelist Jane Austen were of rare quality. Oscar Firkins states that

the general absence of criticism of her family is remarkable in a person of quick eyesight and brusque tongue. Jane Austen liked her¹ lot in life and that life was mostly kinsfolk.

Born of the middle class, Jane Austen was more fortunate than most. Her father, George Austen, was the orphan son of William and Rebecca Austen. His father had been a surgeon in Tunbridge, where George was born in 1731. At nine he was adopted by his lawyer-uncle, Francis Austen, of the same village. The boy was handsome and intelligent. He held scholarships throughout his schooling and a Fellowship at St. John's. While at Oxford George Austen was known as 'the handsome proctor.' He decided upon the life of a clergyman and gentleman, taking Holy Orders in 1761. George Austen was a quiet and reserved man serving for nearly half a century at Steventon in

¹ Oscar W. Firkins, Jane Austen (New York, 1920), p. 201.

Hampshire. As a father he seems to have kept a restraining hand over his house and home, but he did so sensibly and kindly. The children enjoyed complete freedom in the wholesome pleasures that life in their environment offered. The Reverend Mr. Austen was known for his serene temper and well deserved the love and respect that records show were accorded to him.

Elizabeth Jenkins in her study of Jane Austen wrote that

Life in the Rectory was pleasant for a large party of children; for one thing, the Austens, though very lively, were unusually good-tempered. Family disagreements, to say nothing of family quarrels were unknown to them, and besides being fond of each other, they were friendly with the pupils their father took into the house. Mr. Austen was careful as to whom he accepted, taking only "a few youths of chosen friends and acquaintances." . . . "There are several references to the comfortable way the boys settled in with the family."

Another reason for the general pleasantness of the family which, living in somewhat close quarters might have been expected to get in each other's way, was that the boys had vigorous interests of their own. Intelligent as they all were, their father's teaching was at least not irksome to them.

1

Elizabeth Jenkins, Jane Austen (New York, 1949), p. 10.

Elizabeth Jenkins speaks of the Reverend Mr.

Austen's pride in Jane's writings:

. . . Whatever it was that met the Reverend George Austen's eye in the three volumes of exquisitely regular and legible handwriting, he thought very well of it. He was prepared to be pleased, naturally, she had afforded him too much amusement from childhood not to have a high expectation of it now; but he was not the sort of man to be blinded by fatherly partiality, and he would have been very chary of anything's being published, even anonymously, that was not likely to do her justice.¹

The Austens shared a newspaper with another family,² and they read, even though they criticized, the many tales of terror that were in a Mrs. Martin's circulating library.³ A delightful glimpse of Mr. Austen is the recounting of his reading The Midnight Bell in the parlor of the Bull and George on his way home from Godmersham. This was one of the current novels that one could expect the Reverend Mr. George Austen to

¹ Jenkins, p. 60.

² Ibid., p. 151.

³ Annette B. Hopkins, "Jane Austen the Critic" PMLA, XL, (1925), p. 398.

disdain gravely, if he had not been just the man to find great entertainment in it and not be concerned with being seen reading it in public.¹ In 1798 Jane wrote to Cassandra, her older sister, that "father is now reading The Bell which he has got from the library."² In a later letter Jane tells Cassandra that "father reads Cowper to us in the morning to which I listen when I can."³ Henry Austen unhesitatingly said of his father that he was "a profound scholar, possessing a most exquisite taste in every species of literature."⁴

Mr. Austen found time to go visiting with his family, and Jane informed the absent Cassandra in a November letter that a visit was interesting "in spite of interruptions from my father and James."⁵ Letter records also show that Mr. Austen was the parent who accompanied the girls on visits to the dentist.⁶

¹ Jenkins, p. 99.

² William and Richard A. Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters: A Family Record (New York, 1913), p. 108.

³ G. E. Mitton, Jane Austen and Her Times (London, 1905), p. 170.

⁴ R. W. Chapman, Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (London, 1949), p. 37.

⁵ Oscar F. Adams, The Story of Jane Austen's Life (Chicago, 1891), p. 48.

⁶ E. R. Brimley Johnson, The Letters of Jane Austen (New York, 1926), p. 86.

Jane's mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen, was the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Leigh, Master of Balliol and pastor at Henley-on-Thames, and the niece of Theophilus Leigh, Master of Balliol for more than fifty years. Mrs. Austen was justly proud of her ancestry. Mrs. Austen was shrewd, acute, high-minded and determined. She was energetic, extremely capable and had an ease-of-manner with all. She loved her children and they returned her love sincerely.

Records in the Steventon parish register show that:

Jane, daughter of Rev'd Geo. Austen, Rector of the parish, and Cassandra,¹ his Wife, was privately baptized Dec. 17th, 1776.

Jane was one day old. She was put out to nurse until almost two years of age. This was the custom of the age and is not to be misinterpreted. Parents of a nursing-child paid him daily visits, and the wet-nurse would bring the child to the parental home regularly and

¹
Adams, p. 22.

often. When the child was old enough to walk and talk freely, he would be brought home to stay.

The Austen household consisted of James, Edward, Henry, Cassandra, Francis, Jane, and Charles. It was a cheerful, handsome, and congenial family.

The Reverend Mr. Austen did not send his sons away to school. His personal library contained over five hundred volumes. Since good taste and good reading were prevalent in the Austen home, he decided to teach his sons himself. As mentioned earlier, he took in selected boarding pupils. These helped with the family finances and enlarged the contacts of the children.

When Jane was thirteen years old the brilliant and accomplished cousin, Comtesse de Feuilillade, née Hancold, came to live with the family. She helped Jane and Cassandra with their French and no doubt exposed them to the niceties of continental social behavior. This Comtesse later became the second wife of Henry.

Existing records show that the Austens held private theatricals, in the barn during summer, indoors during winter. Life certainly was not monotonous. Every Austen had an affectionate and gentle disposition that made family life a comfortable and growing experience. Mr. Austen found time from his pastoral duties, his animal breeding chores, and his self-appointed parental duties to surround his circle with the aura of gracious family living.

This, then, was the family that produced Jane Austen. Her large family, and her forty-two years in a peering, gossiping community produced the story-teller and supplied the material for her clergymen.

Jane Austen's small group of novels have given posterity a picture of the clergy of the eighteenth century. These novels stand secure in the collection of the world's important literature, yet the author remains as much an enigma today as she was one hundred sixty years ago.

This bright-eyed woman of keen insight and natural ability has given us exceptionally fine portraits of the world she lived in. Her world was small, but the microcosm is as vital as the macrocosm. Jane Austen claimed that she painted with a fine brush on ivory miniatures, yet every detail is perfect.

This paper will deal with one aspect of her portraitures. Jane Austen's inclusion of a cleric in each of her stories served more than the obvious fact that the clergymen were an integral part of the eighteenth century life. Her portraitures of clergymen were reflections of the weak links in the Church's "Chain of Being."

on the clergy

Her treatment of her clerics reveals that she had no sympathy for the system that permitted pluralism, absenteeism, and ill-prepared parsons.

Her knowledge of life in a parsonage and of the kinds of men serving the Church gave Jane Austen the impetus to portray these men with an unflinching brush and definite colors.

To deny Jane Austen's intimate knowledge of the clergy would be unwise. Her parsonage background and the long line of churchmen in her immediate family exposed her, unavoidably, to many experiences involving churchmen and their duties. Her father and two of her brothers were Anglican clergymen. Mr. Austen was a conscientious pastor and his son proved to be a worthy successor to his parish. Her uncle, Dr. Cooper, and several cousins were clerics. Her maternal grandfather was an outstanding rector, as was her maternal uncle. One cousin, George Cooke, was a noted tutor as well as an impressive preacher, numbering Matthew Arnold and John Keble among those he had tutored.

The impression of Jane Austen's morality in her writing is tacit, and religiosity is practically non-existent. She seldom mentions the attire of the clergy or the trappings of the church. Church-going is never stressed in Jane

Austen's novels or in her personal letters. In her personal correspondence, as well as in her novels, the name of God is scarce. There are a few formal phrases such as "God bless you." No more than this seemed necessary to this daughter of a parson. Religion was a part of her life, but religion was not her life. Gaily and caustically, she wrote in a letter that "Mr. Brecknell [a clergyman]¹ is very religious, and has got black whiskers."

That Jane Austen was aware of the religious controversy of her time is reflected in her personal letters. In speaking of Hannah More's Coelebs she stated that she did "not like Evangelicals," but added she was sure that upon reading the novel she would "of course . . . be delighted . . . like other people."² In writing to a niece

¹
Firkins, p. 205.

²
Chapman, p. 410.

Jane Austen advised that she should not reject a suitor because of his excessive virtue:

. . . and don't be frightened by the idea of his acting more strictly up to the precepts of the New Testament than others.¹

There seemed to have been a difference of opinion with this niece about the meaning of the word evangelical:

I am by no means convinced that we ought not all be Evangelical, and am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest and safest.²

Statements like these reveal that Jane Austen was not irreligious or morally obtuse. What she knew she recorded in her novels. Her attitudes toward religious matters, however, were not those of simple acceptance. She knew that the Church had to contend with the world and the flesh, and that it did not feel the need to fight skepticism or to search out its own conscience.

¹ Chapman, p. 410.

² Ibid., p. 420.

Using Jane Austen's letters as a research source will always be controversial for a

sound judgement of them is rendered impossible from the start. Most collections of letters are edited for publication, but hers is the only one which has been given to the public on the understanding that everything of an interesting nature has been first cut out.¹

With such a handicap one finds his research often leading to frustration. Reading her letters, however, leaves the impression that she had a dislike for much expression of religious enthusiasm, and this is reflected in her novels. She followed the example set by "an unemotional England [that] was in the main well served by men who practiced and taught a Christianity that appealed by its very limitations to the age."²

Jane Austen was encased in the sheltered, quiet immunity of a small English rural village and the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the Industrial Revolutions swept by her without comment.

¹ Jenkins, p. 196.

² J. Steven Watson, The Reign of George III, 1760-1815 (London, 1960), p. 42.

Although the Catholics were busily engaged in strengthening their position in England, Jane Austen makes no mention of them, either in her novels or in her letters. The reasons for this omission may be several: her parish had no reformers; quite possibly there were no Catholics in her own circle of acquaintances. Since she did not concern herself with the great questions of the times, she had no desire to sound spiritual depths or discuss religious issues. The trials of the English Catholics were not of primary interest either.

Jane Austen does reveal the nature of her religious preferences, as in this excerpt from a letter to her sister Cassandra:

We do not much like Mr. Cooper's new sermons. They are fuller of regeneration and conversion than ever, with the addition of his zeal in the cause of the Bible Society. ¹

¹ Adams, p. 201.

As with Catholicism, Jane Austen knew little of the Non-Conformist ministry, and Dissent was merely a word to her; so she wrote nothing of these rising religious issues.

* The Anglican Church she knew, and thus in this area she placed her clergy. Firkins has very carefully phrased his opinion of Jane Austen's feelings for the ministry and Anglicanism in his study:

Jane was a decent, docile, worldly woman by whom the paternal cult was accepted without a shadow of question, an atom of feeling, or a trace of display. It required no urgency to induce her to respect an institution to which so many exemplary relatives were indebted for their sustenance.¹

There can be no doubt that Jane Austen had the ability to draw a clergyman who would have illustrated the ideal cleric. Her innate withdrawal from areas with which she was not familiar forced her to depict a pastor no loftier than her father, her brothers, uncles, cousins, and the other parsons whom she knew personally. Those men of the cloth who lived within her area of personal knowledge and presented to her keen eyes were average men. This is not to say that

¹
Firkins, p. 201.

she had a low opinion of clergymen. She esteemed the cleric most highly. Jane Austen was aware that her portraits of the clergy were not everywhere approved:

. . . one clergymen, supported by one lady, 'tho't the Authoress wrong in such times as these, to draw such clergymen as Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton.' ¹

With her father and two brothers as pastors, she was, one may assume, favorably inclined to the profession and proud of the connection with the Church:

"It is pleasant to be among people who know one's connections and care about them." she writes Cassandra in 1808, while visiting her somewhat grand relatives in Kent, the Knights and Knatchbulls. ²

In a letter to a nephew she wrote:

Your Uncle Henry writes very superior sermons. You and I must try to get hold of one or two, and put them into our novels. ³

Correspondence with a friend reveals Jane Austen speaking proudly of the same brother, "We hear he acquits himself . . . with much ease and collectedness." ⁴ Four years earlier she had met a St. John's

¹ Chapman, p. 146.

² D. J. Greene, "Jane Austen and the Peerage" PMLA, LXVIII, (December, 1953), p. 1019.

³ Adams, p. 201.

⁴ Ibid., p. 203.

undergraduate named Wilkes and was delighted with his glowing reports on Henry's ability as a scholar and as one of the best classicists at Cambridge and wrote, "How such a report¹ would have interested my father!"

There is no indication of disrespect for the profession in Jane Austen's writings. Her quarrel was with the type of men who were attracted or pushed into serving the Church because of eighteenth century conditions, secular and sacred.

A relation of Jane's seems to have given occasion to gossip owing to the behavior of a certain Dr. Mant, behavior such that his wife retired to her mother's, whereupon Jane wrote: "But as Dr. M. is a clergyman their attachment, however immoral, has a decorous air." ²

By the middle of the eighteenth century the clergyman had been raised from his lowly social classification as part of the servant group to the level of one who was considered a fit guest at any gentleman's table. His rise in status was a fringe benefit of the patron system. Since most livings were held by the

¹
Austen-Leigh, p. 6.

²
W. Somerset Maugham, "Pride and Prejudice" Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXI, (May, 1948), p. 100.

well-to-do and given to friends and relatives, there was often a family tie between the vicarage and the great house of the parish.

Pluralism (the right to hold and collect tithes from several parishes) and patronage were the two great evils of the Church. Pluralism, not new to the Church's problems, had sprung up in the sixteenth century with the ecclesiastical disendowments. The inevitable result was absenteeism, too often a rector was completely unknown in his parish. It was indeed unfortunate that the inadequacy of the tithes forced the clustering of benefices to insure a living. This is not to imply that the cleric was immoral in accepting tithes from more than one parish. The evil rose when the pluralist made no attempt to provide his various parishes with the proper clerical services.

Too often church work was left to half-hearted curates, but the collection of tithes was always reserved by the vicar as his private province. It is easy to look with distaste upon the abuses in the eighteenth century church, but the wise mind and the

kindly eye will find as much to attract as to
 repel the good in heart. Just as Fielding gave
 us the fat, ignorant, slothful and selfish Parson
 Trulliber and the hard-working, naive country
 curate, Parson Adams, so did Jane Austen give to
 us in her novels a variety of clergymen whose
 characters were as individual in themselves as
 they were typical of the church professionals of
 her day. There is no argument with the statement
 that

Famous examples [of clergymen of the eight-
 eenth century] are the blameless but barely
 ecclesiastical parsons who figure in the novels
 of Jane Austen. ¹

The characters that Jane Austen depicts as eight-
 eenth century clergymen were what those during her
 lifetime had to accept as parsons. Her range of
 observance ran from her exemplary father to the
 Dr. Mant previously mentioned. Her clerics still
 provide the best account of the average churchmen
 of her day.

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, ed., The Ministry in Historical Perspectives (New York, 1956), p. 152.

The Eighteenth Century Church

A brief look at the church of Jane Austen's time will show that it was worldly and lethargic. The reigns of the Georges and the rise of the Whigs brought the Church to its lowest depths at the beginning of the century. By mid-century the Church was Tory politically, but socially its prime purpose seems to have been to keep the poor in their place. The rising Methodists were struggling to alleviate matters and met resistance at every turn. The Duchess of Buckingham wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon that the new Methodist doctrines were

most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in endeavoring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting. ¹

As it has been mentioned, the Church was at its lowest point at the end of the eighteenth century,

1

A. C. Deane, et al., Pillars of the English Church (London, 1934), p. 26.

and enthusiasm was non-existent. There was an open disregard for religion. The clergyman exercised complete freedom in making his duties as light as he chose. Baptisms, marriages, and funerals were considered nuisances, and the parson would schedule them within minutes of each other to expedite his chores. Children were often buried without a service.¹

Hannah More wrote bitterly of the Church and its abuses. Geraldine Mitton quotes Hannah More's complaint that a curate at Axbridge was intoxicated six days out of seven. His eyes, blackened in brawling, would force him to cancel Sunday services.²

It is a sad commentary that such men were in the service of the Church; even sadder is the knowledge that the conditions and the men were a direct result

¹ Mitton, p. 38.

² Ibid., p. 43.

of the Church's deliberate neglect of its duties.

In the Church it had become the Bishop's prerogative to determine in what areas and to what extent a candidate should prepare for the taking of Holy Orders. The examinations were the sole responsibility of the sponsoring bishop. This resulted in great inequalities in training and requirements.

Since the taking of orders depended upon the promise of a living, there was no specific requirement of suitability for church life, and there seems to have been still less requirement for specific preparation. Many candidates were ill-prepared, ignorant of Church and Bible, and unconcerned with their deficiency, as they were well aware that they were judged mainly upon appearance, manners, and prospects.

One Bishop examined a candidate on the cricket field.¹ At another examination only two questions

¹
Mitton, p. 47.

were asked of the aspirant, and one was to give the Hebrew word for skull.¹

The Austen family records reveal that this casual examination of prospective clerics held true in the immediate family as well. A Mr. Lefroy, who married a niece of Jane Austen, was asked just two questions when he applied for Holy Orders. The question recorded in the family papers was the Bishop's query as to whether Mr. Lefroy had ever met the novelist Jane Austen, his aunt-in-law.²

Holy Orders were often bestowed solely on the assurance that the applicant had a living, or 'preferment.' Cowper's satire on this method of becoming a parson is worth quoting:

Church-ladders are not always mounted best
By learned clerks or Latinists professed.
The exalted prize demands an upward look,
Not to be found by poring on a book.
Small skill in Latin, and still less in Greek,

¹ Mitton, p. 47.

² Ibid., p. 46.

Is more adequate to all I seek.
 Let eruditions grace him or not grace,
 I give the bauble but second place;
 His wealth, fame, honours, all that I intend
 Subsist and centre in one point - a friend.
 A friend whate'er he studies or neglects,
 Shall give him consequence, heal all defects.
 His intercourse with peers and sons of peers -
 There dawns the splendours of his future years;
 In that quarter his propitious skies
 Shall blush betimes, and there his glory rise.
 'Your lordship' and 'Your Grace,' what school can teach
 A rhetoric equal to those parts of speech?
 What need of Homer's verse or Tully's prose,
 Sweet interjections! if he learn but those?
 Let reverend churls his ignorance rebuke,
 Who starve upon a dog-eared pentateuch,
 The parson knows enough who knows a duke. ¹

Where a parish living was well endowed it was normally kept for a younger son, a nephew, or a friend.

Whether the proposed recipient of the living was bent towards or qualified for the spiritual life did not seem to enter into the matter at all.

Howitt has a most interesting appendix that corroborates the statement just made:

A gentleman of large fortunes, who controlled a living of great value near London, had a son, little superior to a natural idiot; and for him the living was destined. After residing at Oxford the allotted term, and receiving the graduate's diploma, A.B. and A.M., as a matter of course, he presented himself to one of the bishops for

¹ William Cowper, ed. H. S. Milford, The Poetical Works of William Cowper (London, 1950), pp. 250-251.

ordination. The bishop was apprized by his father of his son's commanding genius and astonishing attainments, and acted accordingly. So, after the usual preliminaries, he thus proceeded to examine the erudite collegian:

Bishop. - Mr. P., can you inform me how many sons Noah had?

Mr. P. - Indeed, my Lord, I cannot. I never heard the gentleman's name before.

Bishop. - Well, Mr. P., Noah had three sons, named Shem, Ham, and Japheth; cannot you tell me their names now?

Mr. P. - Indeed, my Lord, I know nothing of Mr. Noah; and I don't believe that any man in our college has any acquaintance with that gentleman.

Finding it was a hopeless case, the bishop sent the candidate back to his father, who dispatched him a second time to the bishop with an additional hundred pounds - upon which the bishop laid his hands upon him, saying, "Receive thou the Holy Ghost committed unto thee by the imposition of my hands." In which Holy Ghost the bishop did not believe, and of whom the young rector had never heard; but he went to the church, rang the bell, received the tithes, employs [sic] a curate, and spends [sic] the proceeds of his parish in riotous living.¹

Perhaps the story is not entirely true; Howitt does not discuss this point. But the fact that, apocryphal or not, accounts like these were widely circulated and that there is more than a slight foundation of truth in them is reflected in many areas. The Church produced some great scholars, but many of the men that entered her service had the merest smattering of theological knowledge.

1

William Howitt, A History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations (London, 1833), p. 255.

It remains most unfortunate that there was no satisfactory check on the character or the qualifications of the candidates. A degree did not insure that the holder had a background in Theology. If a man was inadequately prepared before ordination, the Church's laxity assured him of inadequate supervision after it.

The well-worn phrase, "Money is the root of all evil," applies to this problem also. The revenues of the various dioceses, parishes, and churches ranged greatly in amounts. The most highly prized and wealthiest were freely admitted as being held for men of family and fashion, a point that has already been brought out. The Church in this way kept an age-old tradition of providing for the younger sons of nobility. The holdings at the lower end of the scale were often considered as embarrassing stepping stones to the higher and more highly prized positions. These were the ones generally assigned to a curate.

The livings that were kept through curacies paid as little as possible. A miserable pittance of twenty or thirty pounds annually was the lot of the average curate. Existence on such an income was bound to be

indigent. The inevitable result was a great number of spiritless and ill-educated men in the clerical profession. If a vicar was a resident in a parish and so could administer the required quarterly Sacrament, he would often engage a curate in 'deacon's orders' to assist him. The pay was generally a most inadequate stipend.

Many an aspiring clergyman knew that his chances of ever gaining a benefice were slight; so he did not go to the expense of taking full Holy Orders. These men were without professional standing; they had no security. They were wage-earners of uncertain tenure, and often found themselves dismissed with little notice and thrown on a market where the supply greatly exceeded the demand. The eighteenth century curate is a well-known figure in fiction, but the novelist does not seem to have exaggerated his plight. The Reverend John Berridge writes that his lot in life seemed to be

long rides, miry roads, sharp weather! Cold houses to sit in, with very moderate fuel, and three or four children roaring or rocking about you; coarse food, and meagre liquor; lumpy beds to lie on, and too short for the feet; stiff blankets, like boards for covering; rise at five in the morning to preach;

at seven breakfast on tea, made with dirty water; at eight, mount a horse, with boots never cleaned, and then ride home, praising God for all mercies. ¹

The surprise in the eighteenth century Church is that with the manner of recruitment and the unenviable position that the clergy held in the eyes of their society, so many men who went into the Church were able and respected men.

Since the prizes of the profession were seldom awarded for purely spiritual reasons, integrity, or scholarship, the poor boy might blossom into a scholar, but never into a bishop. The parish clergyman, like Jane Austen's Mr. Collins, might occasionally be fortunate enough to obtain a comfortable living, but was then forced into a position of finding it expedient to follow the politics and philosophies of his patron as he enjoyed his patronage. The patron took full advantage of his power:

The dependence of the parson not upon the royal government or the bishop but upon the squire was of particular importance at a time when the pulpit was unrivaled as a propaganda agency and the church

¹

Dorothy Hartley, Life and Work of the People of England (New York, 1931), p. 33.

was the only centre of village life and village politics.

Howitt recalls that in reading Faulkner's Tour of Germany he came across a passage, which coming from a man fresh from the observation of Continental churches was worthy of consideration. Faulkner stated that "Nowhere else in Europe are clergymen less respected than in the British Dominions."²

Much of what had happened to the English clergy was a direct result of the practice of presenting livings. This was a right reserved for private patronage, or Parliament, which had absolute control over the Church and over appointments to the high ecclesiastical positions. By Jane Austen's time the great land owners were in a position to take advantage of the government's need for organized support. Through their strength they were able to influence the Parliament, the administration, the universities, and the Church. The government rarely bought needed votes with money bribes. It was put in the position

¹ Gerald R. Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason: 1648-1789 (New York, 1960), p. 127.

² Howitt, p. 228.

of having to barter rights to fill offices, to appoint church patronage, and to grant army and navy contracts in return for parliamentary support.

Howitt comments that the 1832 copy of the British or Clerical Magazine carried the following statement:

Of the whole number of benefices in England, nearly eight thousand, more than two-thirds of the whole, are in private patronage. Of the clergy, a very considerable number have purchased the livings which they hold; and of the remainder, most have been brought up to the church, and educated with a view to some particular piece of preferment in the gift of family and relations. Whether this be right or wrong, it is an effect almost necessarily following from so large a portion of the property of the church being private property; a state of things not to be altered, and which they who wish to abolish pluralities do not talk of altering. ¹

With such handling of spiritual matters the religious life of the eighteenth century has been rightfully condemned as being cold and barren.

In her treatment of the clergy Jane Austen has made an indelible mark upon the eighteenth century Church history. In this discussion events from each of Jane Austen's main works that involve the clergy will be connected with research data to show her

¹
Howitt, p. 226.

authentic portrayal of the clergy of her time. This will show that an examination of her carefully drawn clerics reveals an intensive and unbiased knowledge of the Church and its clergy, as well as her own intuitive analysis of human nature and its reaction to its environment.

Using her family background as reinforcement, it will be stressed that Jane Austen absorbed much in the rectory of her father. As an easy-going clergyman who read Pope and the Gothic novels, avoided politics, and used curates when he deemed it convenient, the Reverend Mr. George Austen can be considered the 'skeleton framework' for the Jane Austen clergy. Her father's regard for elegance of manners as one of the cardinal virtues and vulgarity of any kind as one of the deadly sins can be assumed to be reflected in her satirical jibes at the vulgarity that the Church accepted in her clergy.

Sense and Sensibility

Sense and Sensibility is the story of two sisters. Elinor of the Sense and Marianne of the Sensibility. The clergyman in the tale is Edward Ferrars, although he does not earn the title of Pastor until the end of the novel. Edward, loved by Elinor, had become entangled with a sly, avaricious, and illiterate girl, Lucy Steele. His wealthy mother disinherited him upon learning of his engagement. The engagement had been engineered by Lucy, and Edward, as a gentleman, felt he could not honorably break the engagement.

*E.F.S
Motives* { Edward decided to take Holy Orders as the easiest way to provide a home for a prospective bride and an income at the same time. His only qualification for the ministry was that he had been an Oxford man. No longer receiving an income from his mother, Edward was now able to make his choice of a profession. His problem had been one common to the sons of wealth; Edward discussed this with Mrs. Dashwood, mother of Elinor and Marianne:

I have no necessary business to engage me, no profession to give me employment or afford me anything like independence. . . . I am an idle, helpless being. We [his family] 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. They recommended the army. That was a great deal too smart for me. The law was allowed to be genteel enough. . . . But I had no inclination for the law. As for the navy, it had fashion on its side, but I was too old [eighteen] when the subject was first started to enter it, and, at length, . . . idleness was pronounced . . . the most advantageous and honorable. . . . I was therefore entered at Oxford, and have been properly idle ever since.¹

Not until his unfortunate misalliance with Lucy Steele and the resulting disinheritance is he forced to earn a living, but is now free to make his own choice of how to do so. Faced with the necessity of earning a living, he decided that the Church was the most likely refuge.

Edward Ferrars, like the father of Jane Austen, wanted to live like a gentleman and felt that the Church was his best possibility. His naive view of the ministry as a stepping-stone to a living (in both senses of earning a living and a home) is described by Jane Austen. She does not waste words or time explaining Edward Ferrars' lack of deep religious feeling or the insistent call of vocation. His decision was the

¹ Jane Austen, The Novels of Jane Austen (New York, 1941), p. 61.

accepted mode of the day, especially when a living was assured.

Edward Ferrars had the qualifications of age and an Oxford education. All he needed was a definite place in which to perform as a parson. Ferrars was fairly sure that his family background would bring forth an offer of a benefice as soon as the minor chore of ordination was completed. In a conversation with Mrs. Jennings, mother-in-law of a Dashwood cousin, Elinor explained:

I know so little of these kinds of forms, that I can hardly conjecture as to the time, or the preparation necessary; but I suppose two or three months will complete the ordination.¹

Elinor's words bear out R. J. Mitchell's report that morals or intellect were minor considerations for clerical preparation, and the idea that special training should be part of a parson's education would have been a surprise to most people of the era.² Sense and Sensibility is a product of 1811; by 1830 we find that

¹
Austen, p. 173.

²
R. J. Mitchell, A History of the English People (London, 1951), pp. 393-394, passim.

a number of "legislative measures were passed which sought to remedy some of the anachronisms and evils which were handicapping the Church."¹

Edward Ferrars, faced with the problems of destitution and of a wife who would not be an asset, had made his own decision:

. . . it all came out . . . how he had been so worried by what had passed, that as soon as he had went away [sic] from his mother's house, he had got upon his horse, and rid [sic] into the country somewhere or other; and how he had staid at an inn all Thursday and Friday, on purpose to get the better of it.²

After serious contemplation of his problems, Edward reached a decision and Jane Austen informs the reader through Lucy's sister that

Edward have [sic] got some business at Oxford, he says, so he must go there for a time; and after that, as soon as he can light upon a bishop, he will be ordained.³

¹ Kenneth S. Latourette, The Nineteenth Century in Europe: The Protestant and Eastern Churches (New York, 1959), p. 282.

² Austen, pp. 162.

³ Ibid., p. 163.

Edward's "lighting upon a bishop" is probably more than a gay figure of speech:

It is said . . . that Brownlow North, Bishop of Winchester, examined his candidates for ordination in a cricket-field during a match. ¹

Conceding that money and not a divine call led Edward to the church portals, the matter of income occupies the females in Sense and Sensibility to a great extent. Mrs. Ferrars made "not the slightest objection against Edward's taking orders for the sake of two hundred fifty at the utmost."² Lucy Steele petulantly complained that "he could get nothing but a curacy, and how was they [sic] to live on that."³ Mrs. Jennings was horrified at the thought that Edward might have to "set down [sic]"⁴ upon a curacy of fifty pounds a year."

With this general outlook upon the life of a curate, Colonel Brandon (who eventually marries Marianne Dashwood) hesitantly offered to Elinor

¹ Mitton, p. 47.

² Austen, p. 224.

³ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

that since Ferrars

intends to take orders . . . the living at Delaford, now just vacant, is his, if he thinks it worth his acceptance; but that, perhaps, so unfortunately circumstanced, as he is now, it may be nonsense to doubt.¹

Recalling that a living was seldom offered without ties to any person outside the family circle, there is no surprise at Ferrars' astonished "Colonel Brandon give me a living? Can it be possible?"² His words are the reflection of the extreme improbability of a casual acquaintance offering a living to an outsider.

Jane Austen wisely used this same situation to illuminate the fact that, regardless of how or why Edward Ferrars went into the ministry, he, and many others with the same background, performed capably as ministers:

. . . [Edward] might be judged from the ready discharge of his duties in every particular, from an increasing attachment to his wife and home, and from the regular cheerfulness of his spirits, he might be supposed no less contented with his lot, no less free from every wish of an exchange.³

¹ Austen, p. 168.

² Ibid., p. 172.

³ Ibid., p. 226.

Pride and Prejudice

The novel Pride and Prejudice was the product of a twenty year old girl. It is rich in wit and humor. Her father recognized its worth and submitted it to a publisher, but it was rejected. When it was published later it became, and remains, the most popular of her works.

The story revolves around the Bennet family with its five marriageable daughters. It is written in a realistic style and shows how pride and prejudice in young people can keep them apart.

Because the Bennets have no sons their property, by entail, will pass to a cousin, William Collins. Mr. Collins, a newly ordained minister, has the patronage of the haughty Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Kent. He is ridiculous, pompous, and always obsequiously obedient to every whim Lady Catherine expresses. When she suggests that he marry, he hastens to comply.

He logically selects the Bennet girls and proposes to the oldest, Elizabeth. Shocked and surprised at her unexpected refusal, he hastily asks her twenty-seven year old friend, Charlotte Lucas, homely and

an old maid. She accepts, as all she desires from life, now, is a home of her own.

. . . Think of Charlotte Lucas in Pride and Prejudice, deliberately accepting the hand of a man she despises - the egregious Mr. Collins, a complacent fool of the most impossible kind - because she knows that if she does not close with that offer she will never get another, and the fate in store for her as an unmoneyed spinster in a genteel society is too tragic to contemplate. Critics have remarked that there is no real delineation of true love in Jane Austen, and that is true enough, for Miss Austen knew only too well that in that kind of society genteel ladies cannot afford true love: their objective must be marriage, and marriage with someone eligible. In Jane Austen only the poor can afford passion. ¹

Mr. Collins is presented as the type who planned for a life as a clergyman as his logical step up the social ladder, but remains an insufferable bore throughout his career. Mentioned earlier was the general situation of the clergyman who was obligated to toady to his patron in order to keep his curacy or living; Mr. Collins is "the time-server courting his patron with honied words." ² Jane Austen's sketch of him is a

¹ David Daiches, "Jane Austen, Karl Marx and the Aristocratic Dance" American Scholar, XVI, (Summer, 1948), p. 290.

² Mitton, p. 35.

caricature, but it serves the purpose of illustrating forcibly the greatest error in the church system of her day, that of local patronage.

Jane Austen's pen portrays Mr. Collins boldly and bluntly. She allows him no quarter in delicacy or restraint. He is fawning to his superiors and bullying to his inferiors. He is self-important and subservient. Oscar Firkins comments that

His flunkeyism has a peculiar literary value; it is not in the least disinterested, but in a gross way, it is sincere. He wants the wages, but he likes the job. . . . It was no hypocrisy in him to flatter, but the bent of his mind, which was always perfectly good-humoured, obliging and servile. ¹

There is much to dislike in the personality of a clergyman like Mr. Collins. There were probably far too many with his "earnest endeavor to demean"² who helped lower the respect for the churchmen of the eighteenth century.

¹
Firkins, p. 41.

²
Austen, p. 268.

The reader, like Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice, is "chiefly struck with [Mr. Collins']¹ extraordinary deference to Lady Catherine." But, unlike Elizabeth, we are aware through available records of the difficulties of a man with "no family" who wished to secure any presentation, much less one so well endowed as Lady Catherine's. Armed with this knowledge it is no surprise to find Mr. Collins so "extraordinarily" obsequious.

Mr. Collins' initial letter to the Bennets sets his pattern of behavior and personality. In this missile of self-invitation he announced that he would

. . . be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England. As a clergyman, moreover, [he felt it his] duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in families within the reach of [his] influence.²

¹ Austen, p. 269.

² Ibid., p. 268.

Mr. Collins, as a clergyman, felt the obligation to be gallant to those within the sphere of his influence and admitted this at a later point in the novel:

I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such elegant little compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible.¹

Collins was being honest when he said that "These are the kinds of little things which please her Ladyship, and it is a sort of attention which I conceive myself peculiarly bound to pay."²

Collins was not the type to "scamper after the hounds," and as his patron was a lady there was no need for this, but parlor behavior was vital to his well-being. Jane Austen reveals that with all of his planning he still went far astray. After a supper at Netherfield he pro-

¹ Austen, p. 271.

² Ibid.

claimed that a clergyman should not spend too much of his time in the harmless and innocent pastime of music because as a rector

he has much to do. In the first place, he must make an agreement for tithes as may be beneficial to himself and not offensive to his patron. He must write his sermons; and the time that remains will not be too much for his parish duties, and the care and improvement of his dwelling, which he cannot be excused from making as comfortable as possible. And I do not think it of light importance that he should have conciliatory manners towards those to whom he owes his preferment. I cannot acquit him of that duty; nor could I think well of the man who should admit an occasion of testifying his respect towards anybody connected with the family.¹

With this text of clerical duties, Mr. Collins bowed ceremoniously to Mr. Darcy, who was "connected" with Lady Catherine's family. The reader will notice that the Church is not mentioned as being important, and one can assume that Mr. Collins had no musical talent whatsoever, or this speech of self-importance would not have been made at a supper-party gathering where young and old were singing or enjoying the singing.

¹
Austen, p. 270.

Part of Jane Austen's art is her handling of such a cleric as Mr. Collins. Unlucky as his place in society and his immediate circle is, the reader never learns to like the man.

Jane Austen's tone is authentic, but has an air of tongue-in-cheek writing. As a wage-earner in an uncertain tenure, Mr. Collins was well aware that his position was a definitely inferior one. Jane Austen reveals this picture to us when she tells us that the Lady Catherine had

asked him to dine twice. . . . and had sent for him only the Saturday before to make up her pool of quadrille in the evening. . . . She had always spoken to him, as she would to any other gentleman; she made not the slightest objection to his joining in the society of the neighbourhood.¹

Collins is one of the clerical types that Jane Austen could not forgive the Church for accepting as one of its representatives. Her remarkable powers show him as a comic character, yet we can see him in relation to every aspect of ordinary life.

¹
Austen, p. 270.

Mr. Collins was "bustling and peeping after preferment, as most of the profession [did] in [those] days."¹ There is no denying that he was "not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society."² Obviously only "a fortunate chance had recommended him to Lady Catherine de Bourgh when the living at Hunsford was vacant."³ Mr. Collins would do everything within his power to keep his preferment, no matter how degrading were the means of doing so.

Jane Austen's sketch of a man using the Church as a hope of climbing higher in the social scale is accurate. Equally accurate is her sketch of a Collins-personality reaction to the windfall of a good living.

It must be pointed out that it was not easy to secure an adequate living without family connections. Livings were of great monetary value, and every patron had kinsmen and friends who were seeking preferment.

1 N. Sykes, Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1934), p. 205.

2 Austen, p. 272.

3 Ibid.

William Drake, whose family records are in The Sharledoes Papers of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, worked long and diligently to secure a benefice for his friend and family tutor, the Reverend Mr. Thomas Pritchard. Pritchard was more qualified than most aspirants. He was a Brasenose man and a personal friend of the important Drake family. However, the Drake request for the Penn vicarage from Assheton Curzon in 1768 was denied. Not until three years later, and much work, plus a personal plea to Richard Lowndes, and the Lord Chancellor, the Honorable Henry Bathurst, did the Reverend Mr. Pritchard receive the living at Winslow and Grantborough. William Drake writes of his eventual success in "long endeavoring to get something for Mr. Pritchard that he could call his own while he was able to enjoy it."¹

When a man of wealth and influence who does not have a living within his family or the right connections to obtain a preferment has to go to such lengths, both in methods and time, to aid a qualified friend, it becomes very apparent why Collins was so abjectly grateful to Lady Catherine.

1

G. Eland, ed., The Sharledoes Papers of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (London, 1947), p. 308.

It is no surprise that Mr. Collins wrote to the Bennet family that

having received my ordination at Easter I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, . . . whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship.¹

Church attendance was generally poor in the age and often the major factor of congregational attendance was the regularity of attendance and the attitude of attention given by the patron of the parish. Mr. Collins confided happily that his patron "had been graciously pleased to approve of both the discourses which he had already had the honour of preaching before her."²

The point made is not that Mr. Collins was an exceptional preacher (Elizabeth had been "struck" with "his kind intention of christening, marrying, and burying his parishoners whenever it were required"),³ but that he realized how seldom approval was bestowed upon the sermon by the patron. The fact that the

¹ Austen, p. 268.

² Ibid., p. 270.

³ Ibid., p. 269.

sermon was probably read from a text and Lady Catherine's approval would not be considered of prime importance does still not change the lines of the clerical picture that Jane Austen is sketching for us.

The patron's influence was far-reaching, not only in matters of church activity and social consideration but often, as with Mr. Collins, where the personal life of the clergy was concerned. The Lady Catherine "opined" that Mr. Collins should marry. He felt that with her decision he was in a position to do so, and the net result was the self-issued invitation to meet his cousins, the Bennets, and choose one of their daughters as his bride.

Mr. Collins' crudity allowed him to write that his gracious lady "had not the slightest objection to his leaving the parish occasionally for a week or two, to visit his relations."¹ With Lady de Bourgh's encouragement he magnanimously proposed to Elizabeth Bennet with these words:

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; second,

¹
Austen, p. 270.

that I am convinced it will add greatly to my happiness; and thirdly - which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness.

This is amusing, but certainly tragic to the young lady receiving such a proposal, and to the fact that men of so little tact and refinement were, not only tolerated, but encouraged to enter the Church through the hope of such patronage as Lady Catherine's.

*Lack of
social
graces*

Jane Austen subtly reveals that such a personality as Mr. Collins' is not necessarily one of illiteracy as well. There is no conceivable reason for an educated man, and one who makes it a point of honor to consider himself the epitome of politeness, to pen the insulting letter Collins does to Mr. Bennet. The occasion is the elopement of the Bennet's younger daughter:

The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this and it is the more to be lamented, because, there is reason to suppose, as my dear Charlotte informs me, that this licentiousness of behavior in your daughter has proceeded from a faulty degree of indulgence; though, at the same time, for the consolation of yourself and Mrs. Bennet,

¹
Austen, p. 295.

I am inclined to think that her own disposition must be naturally bad, or she could not be guilty of such an enormity at so early an age. . . . [the de Bourghs] agree with me in apprehending this false step in one daughter will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others; for who, as Lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family? This consideration leads me to reflect, with augmented satisfaction, on a certain event last November 4, had it been otherwise, I must have been involved in all your sorrow and disgrace. ¹

The disgrace of an elopement, even in those days, was not such that Mr. Collins could fairly reflect with "augmented satisfaction" that Elizabeth's refusal of his proposal saved him from a terrible fate. Even more important is that such a small-minded person should be considered for the Church at all. Yet the bishop ordained this person who advised the despairing parents to

console yourself as much as possible, to throw off your unworthy child from your affection forever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her heinous offense. ²

¹ Austen, pp. 407-408.

² Ibid., p. 408.

Mr. Collins is without a doubt a crowning glory in Jane Austen's character achievements. Geraldine Mitton states that "here is a creation whose name might signify a quality of 'collinesqueness'.¹" This solemn, thick-skinned parson is the best of the kind ever depicted in fiction. How unfortunate for the history of the eighteenth century Church that such a man was completely acceptable to so many of the people of influence in that era.

¹ Mitton, p. 38.

Mansfield Park

Mansfield Park is used by Jane Austen as the vehicle to project her concept of the new cleric. To present a well-rounded background for this, she uses the almost unnecessary Dr. Norris and the bon-vivant Dr. Grant as two parsons who consider their chosen life as a mere means of livelihood, but shows that each man is an intelligent and educated one. The 'new' cleric is Edmund Bertram, the second son of the family, who is forced through the extravagance of his elder brother to accept one of the Bertram livings to bring up his income. Edmund, like Edward Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility, chooses the ministry through unexpected need, but has the desire and the ability to become an exceptional pastor.

Edmund Bertram of Mansfield Park would stand comparison with the actual Reverend James Woodforde whose long and unexciting career is preserved in his personal diary. The Woodfordes were a family of excellent and respectable men, of gentlemanly manners, and a traditional leaning towards the Church. Reverend Mr. Woodforde spent the bulk of his life as the rector of the village of Weston Longville in Norfolk.

He had been preferred to this living in 1775 and remained a stay-at-home parson, recording only rare visits to Norwich and Oxford.¹

James Woodforde reveals, as Jane Austen indicated Edmund Bertram would do, a contentment with the routines and responsibilities of a parson's life. The Reverend Mr. Woodforde took a keen interest in all of his parishoners and their lives; his diary records that he followed the progress of the parish children that he had christened. This was the point that Sir Thomas Bertram, Edmund's father, was making in the Austen novel when he said that a parish needed its parson more than three or four hours a week, that he must live among them and by constant attention prove himself their well-wisher and friend.² Parson Woodforde more than adequately filled the concept of the ideal rector as the giver of advice and money to those who needed it, and love and understanding to the transgressor.

¹ Edmund Gosse, Silhouettes (New York, 1925), p. 157.

² Austen, p. 619.

Jane Austen does not spend much time on the actual duties of a parson. Perhaps this is another indication of the little influence or effect these duties had on her father and the Austen household. There is a gentle raillery in her having Edmund bow and so gracefully compliment his father's words on the duties of a minister:

Sir Thomas undoubtedly understands the duty of a parish priest. We must hope his son may prove that he knows it, too.¹

It is refreshing to find that there were some upright and serious men in those days who considered the life and duties of a clergyman well worth their best and most conscientious efforts.

What we can accept as Jane Austen's concepts of the duties of a parish priest are in the words referred to previously, spoken by Sir Thomas:

A parish has wants and claims which can only be known by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, with-

¹
Austen, p. 619.

out giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine Services; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey; and that if he does not live among his parishoners, and prove himself, by constant attention, their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own. ¹

Here is Jane Austen's ideal clergyman, a true shepherd of his flock, certainly a direct opposite to the dancing-shadow Henry Tilney of Northanger Abbey. Edmund Bertram is a man who is to dedicate his life in devotion to the best interest of his people, and one who was to put their welfare prior to his own. This was not the usual outlook for the century's clergymen.

An incidental character is the clergyman-uncle of the young Crawfords, Dr. Grant. A few, quick, sure strokes of the Austen pen make him absolutely clear. Physically his appearance is quite what one expects of the eighteenth century cleric. He is "a short-necked, apoplectic fellow, and plied well with good things, would soon pop off."² Cartoons and drawings of the parsons of this era invariably show the well-

¹ Austen, p. 619.

² Ibid., p. 482.

beneficed clergy as fitting the description of Dr. Grant. Only the curates are shown as lank and underfed. A good living and good eating seem to have signified a short life, especially if the parson was "very fond of eating."¹

Available records show that Jane Austen's father, like Dr. Grant and Henry Tilney, was among the better paid clergy. The Austens lived comfortably and with refinement. The houses of these clerics were well designed and furnished. There were servants to scour and to shine, housekeeper-cooks, and the man to look after the master. Jane Austen records in her personal letters that her father left a ball early, "walking home with his man to carry the lanthorn."² Because wages were low for household help, many vicarages did not need to economize here. Mrs. Jennings, in Sense and Sensibility, exclaims over Colonel Brandon's depreciation of his Delaford living:

. . . apologizing for a house that to my knowledge has five sitting-rooms on the ground floor, and, . . . , could make up fifteen beds! ³

Jane Austen is slyly nudging the conscience of someone like the Reverend John Warneford who, when writing

¹
Austen, p. 486.

²
R. W. Chapman, Jane Austen: Selected Letters (London, 1956), p. 58.

³
Austen, p. 174.

about a living in which he was interested, inquired:

I suppose your house fitted for the commodious reception of a Family, which, including three servants, consists at present of seven Persons.

Jane Austen uses Dr. Grant to illustrate that a comfortably settled vicarage would be cheerfully exchanged for the honor of being at Westminster or St. Paul's. As Mrs. Grant expressed it, not the least of the attractions was the advantage of metropolitan "nurserymen and poulterers"² to help set a table to please the palate of a gourmet-clergyman.

The pleasures of eating that were assigned to Dr. Grant by Jane Austen can be matched with the diary of Reverend James Woodforde. He wrote at ecstatic length and with obvious satisfaction of the pleasures of eating. His diary records with loving care his consumption of roast duck, swan, pike with "a pudding in his belly" and the palate-pleasures³ of eating gooseberries with roast pork.

Dr. Grant is Jane Austen's direct rebuttal to the acceptable clergyman of the day. Through Mary Crawford,

¹
Eland, p. 44.

²
Austen, p. 597.

³
Dorothy Marshall, English People in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1956), p. 128.

his relative, she tells us that:

Dr. Grant is most kind and obliging to me and though he is really a gentleman, and, I dare say, a good scholar and clever, and often preaches a good sermon, and is very respectable, I see him to be an indolent, selfish, bon vivant, who must have his palate considered in everything; and who will not stir a finger for the convenience of anyone; and who, moreover, if the cook makes a blunder, is out of humour with his excellent wife.¹

Jane Austen gives us a low view of the clerical character, but there is no malicious injustice here to a profession that in reality she held in high esteem. She had a story to tell, a condition to reveal, and she was realistic in her approach to laying the groundwork of fact for the new minister that was to evolve around the person of Edmund Bertram.

In Mansfield Park the eldest son of the Bertrams, Tom, had managed to live so that the portion set aside for Edmund dwindled to the point where Edmund would have to take the living in the possession of the Bertram family, the Thornton vicarage.

Here, as in Sense and Sensibility, the taking of orders was a minor chore as Edmund has the basic

¹
Austen, pp. 536-537.

requirements for a churchman, those of family, a benefice, and the Oxford background that put him into the select group of clerics.

Henry Crawford upon learning that Edmund was taking some instructions from Dr. Grant "about the living he is to step into so soon" notes that

he will have not less than seven hundreds a year. . . . he will still live at home, it will all be his for menus plairs; and a sermon at Christmas and Easter, I¹ suppose, will be the sum total of sacrifice.¹

However trite this sounds it was an accurate appraisal of the situation of the day. Jane Austen's plan for Edmund as the 'new' cleric was to change this picture.

Mary Crawford, who had planned on marrying Edmund Bertram, the young nobleman, was not interested in Mr. Bertram, the parson. She remarked of Edmund's planned ordination that it

does put me in mind of some old heathen heroes who after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods for their safe return.²

She was referring to the safe return of Edmund's father from an overseas journey to check on family investments and the coincidental decision of Edmund to go into the ministry. Edmund voices his protest on considering his

¹ Austen, p. 606.

² Ibid., p. 535.

coming ordination as a sacrifice for his father's safe return. He insists that the move is not only voluntary but his personal desire as well. Mary listens calmly and then delivers her most crushing blow when she answers his protestations with:

It is fortunate that your inclination and your father's convenience should accord so well. There is a very good living kept for you, I understand.¹

When the serious illness of Tom Bertram seemed to indicate that Edmund might become the eldest son and heir to Mansfield Park, Mary hoped that he might be rescued from the fate of "becoming a parson."

Edmund's future has been established from infancy with the Thornton living and, Jane Austen tells us, there is another living held for him as well. His comfort was fairly well assured through the "blessings" of pluralism. The only change was that Edmund would now have to work at being a parson in order not to share the monies coming in with a curate or two.

¹
Austen, p. 535.

Material comfort in this novel is not the issue, Jane Austen uses Edmund to illustrate the sense of inferiority a society-oriented young woman like Mary Crawford felt to be part of being a parson's wife and to portray Edmund as the pre-destined youth who will make an excellent churchman through decision and self-sacrifice, as well as preparation.

In a conversation with Mary and Edmund, Fanny Price remarks that no one seems to find it strange that sons follow their military sires in the same field because of likely preferment, but that the same society looks condescendingly upon the man who chooses the clergy because his preferment is assured. Mary quickly asserts that this is true and only natural

for reasons good. The profession, either navy or army, is its own justification. Soldiers and sailors are always acceptable in society. Nobody can wonder that men are soldiers or sailors. ¹

Edmund queries:

But the motives of a man who takes orders with a certainty of preferment may be fairly suspected, you think? To be justified in your eyes he must do it in the most complete uncertainty of any provision. ²

¹
Austen, p. 535.

²
Ibid.

* Mary retorts sharply to this with:

What! take orders without a living! No! that is madness indeed; absolute madness! . . . Oh! no doubt he is very sincere in preferring an income already made, to the trouble of working for one: and has the best intention of doing nothing at all the rest of his days but eat, drink, and grow fat. It is indolence, Mr. Bertram, indeed. Indolence and love of ease; a want of all laudable ambitions, of taste for good company, or of inclination to take the trouble of being agreeable, which makes men choose to become clergymen. A clergyman has nothing to do but be slovenly and selfish, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does the work, and the business of his life is to dine.¹

Attitudes such as these certainly reveal the eighteenth century outlook on what was originally planned as a spiritual life. It would be foolish to deny that Edmund was somewhat of a prig and that Miss Crawford was a little too gay. But her opinions that so shocked Edmund and the meek Fanny Price were those that were current in her times, reprehensible though they were.

The whole unhappy conversation was not resolved satisfactorily, and to Edmund's query as to why Miss Crawford should find his choice of the church so strange as he must be "designed for some profession," she replied that the clergy had never occurred to her. She

¹
Austen, pp. 535-536.

had assumed that with the Bertrams as with most "good" families there was "generally an uncle or a godfather to leave a fortune to the second son." She stated that the church was "always the lot of the youngest, where there were many to choose before him." Surely, she insists, Edmund was "really fit for something better. . . . A clergy-¹man was nothing."

Since Miss Crawford had revealed herself thus far, she continued with her cosmopolitan view of the clergy:

. . . what is to be done in the church? Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines [the army or the navy] distinction may be gained, but not in the church.²

Jane Austen, through Edmund, defended the church:

A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton [sic] in dress. But I cannot call that situation nothing which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind individually and collectively considered, temporally and eternally, which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and conse-

¹ Austen, pp. 524-525, passim.

² Ibid., p. 524.

quently of the manners which revolt from their influence. No one here can call the office nothing. If the man who holds it is so, it is by the neglect of his duty, by foregoing its just importance, and stepping out of his place to appear what he ought not to appear.¹

Mary and Fanny listen to Edmund patiently, but Mary tells Edmund:

You assign greater consequence to the clergyman than one has been used to hear given. . . . One does not see much of this influence and importance in society, and how can it be acquired where they are so seldom seen themselves? How can two sermons a week, even supposing them worth hearing, supposing the preacher to have the sense to prefer Blair's to his own, do all that you speak of - govern the conduct and fashion the manners of a large congregation for the rest of the week? One scarcely sees a clergyman out of his pulpit.²

Edmund defends his statement by saying that

it is not in fine preaching only that a good clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighbourhood, where the parish and the neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct, . . . And with regard to their influencing public matters, Miss Crawford must not misunderstand me, or suppose I mean to call them arbiters of good breeding, the regulators of refinement and courtesy, the master of the ceremonies of life. The Manners I speak of might rather be called conduct, perhaps, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend; and it will, I

¹ Austen, p. 525.

² Ibid.

believe, be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation.¹

Another phase of the clergy that needed correction is discussed, and through these young people Jane Austen projected an exceptionally fine picture of poor preaching. Miss Crawford flippantly said of the maids who went to church

all starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different - especially if the² poor chaplain were not worth looking at.

Historical and factual research shows that the eighteenth century clergy were still performing their obligations as they had been done in the time of Queen Anne when

There were priests in the livings then as now, and they duly baptized, married, preached to, and buried their flock; but there was little vitality in their ministrations, little or no zeal or earnestness as to the spiritual state of those committed to their charge, and very little practical teaching, in the way of setting before them a higher social standard for them to imitate. The Church services had no life in them; with the exception of the cathedrals the services were read, and the soul-depressing parson and clerk duet had its usual effect of deadening the religious sensibilities of the so-called worshippers.³

¹ Austen, p. 525.

² Ibid., p. 521.

³ John Ashton, Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne: Taken from Original Sources (New York, 1937), p. 337.

The problem of poor and uninterested attendance could certainly be laid at the doorstep of the quality of preaching; seldom was it of high enough caliber to hold a congregation. The art of reading had been neglected in the religious background of the clergy. It is true that efforts were being made to improve the methods of teaching candidates for the ministry and serious efforts were being made to raise the standards of scholarship. Kenneth Latourette reports that

A great advance was seen in the preparation for the ministry. . . . The eighteenth century level of intellectual and spiritual life in them both [Oxford and Cambridge] left much to be desired, but improvement had begun to come before 1815. Not many years later clerical education societies were organized and by the middle of the century theological colleges had been founded in several dioceses.¹

Jane Austen was aware of this trend and reveals it in this 1815 novel through Edmund's comments after Henry had read so effectively from a work of Shakespeare:

. . . in my profession how little the art of reading has been studied! How little a clear manner and a good delivery, have been attended to! I speak rather of the past, however, than the present. There is a spirit of improvement abroad; but among

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Latouretts, p. 285.

those who were ordained twenty, thirty, forty years ago, the large number, to judge by their performance, must have thought that reading was reading, and preaching was preaching. It is different now. The subject is more justly considered. It is felt that distinction and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths; and besides there is more general observation and taste, a more critical knowledge diffused than formerly; in every congregation there is a larger proportion who know a little of the matter, and who can judge and criticize.¹

Edmund had earlier told Mary that "a fine preacher is followed and admired."²

The curate who taught school to alleviate his financial situation served a dual role in helping his own oral delivery problems as well as his financial ones. Since so many of the men in Holy Orders had turned to teaching to make an adequate living, they often found, like Dr. Priestley, that "in this employment, contrary to my expectations, I found the greatest satisfaction."³

In this novel Jane Austen succeeded in her plan to present an ideal for a clergyman, one whose life would be devoted to the welfare and best interests of his parish before his own.

¹ Austen, p. 675.

² Ibid., p. 525.

³ Marshall, p. 137.

Jane Austen wisely stayed with what she knew and in a letter speaking of Mansfield Park wrote:

Mr. Cooke says 'It is the most sensible novel he has ever read; and the manner in which I treat the clergy delights them very much.' ¹

The Prince Regent's librarian, J. S. Clarke, had requested that she

delineate . . . a clergyman who should pass his time between the metropolis and the country, . . . neither Goldsmith, nor La Fontaine . . . have in my mind quite delineated an English clergyman, at least of the present day. ²

Jane Austen refused this request, graciously, with a note saying:

I am quite honoured by your thinking me capable of drawing such a clergyman. . . . But I assure you I am not. ³

and drew for posterity Edmund Bertram instead.

¹ Adams, pp. 176-177.

² Ibid., p. 189.

³ Ibid., p. 190.

Emma

Emma, a product of 1816, now ranks only below Pride and Prejudice in popularity. In a general discussion on Thackeray as a novelist, Kirk stated that "the plot of Emma is equal to that of any of Ben Jonson's comedies."¹

The novel revolves around the match-making of Emma Woodhouse and contains some of Jane Austen's best character portrayals. The clergyman, Mr. Elton, is vital to the plot as Emma uses him in her match-making. He, however, as an ego-centric young man, had decided that Emma was to be his choice for a bride. The resulting involvements make the story.

Jane Austen shows Mr. Elton as a young man with every physical and financial endowment in his favor, and yet a failure as a clergyman because of personality problems.

Mr. Elton in Emma is Jane Austen's direct attack on personal egoism in the clergy. He is also a

1

J. F. Kirk, "Thackeray as a Novelist" North American Review, LXXVII, (July, 1853), p. 202.

prime example of her control as an artist. Jane Austen places him in a situation which reveals him as a mean and ungrateful person, then stays her hand in her treatment of his petty spitefulness.

A first and casual reading of the story does not reveal the depth of Jane Austen's analysis of the social codes and standards of her time in relation to the clergy. But further perusal reveals that no phase of the accepted or unacceptable is ignored. Here, as in every situation in her novels, Jane Austen saw clearly how the mores of her society affected lives, and so she depicted those lives.

As an author she subtly points out the nuances of the ranges in her society, where the various strata could mingle and overlap. Both the clerical and the secular society were dominated by the acceptance of privileges and by the distinctions that marked off one class of men from their fellows.

Jane Austen's cleric in this novel falls into that group of aggressive clergymen who took the advice of Sykes¹ quoted before that if they expected preferment they must bustle and peep after it.

Mr. Elton, like Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice, felt the obligation to be agreeable and pleasant at all times and costs. Mr. Knightley told Emma that he

never saw a man more intent upon being agreeable than Mr. Elton. It is downright labour to him . . . every feature works.¹

Jane Austen carefully pointed out, through Emma, that

Mr. Elton's manners are superior. . . . They have more gentleness. They might be more safely held up as a pattern. . . . Mr. Elton is good-humoured, cheerful, obliging, and gentle.²

Later in the novel Emma informed the newly arrived Jane Fairfax:

When you have been here a little longer, Miss Fairfax, you will understand that Mr. Elton is the standard of perfection in Highbury, both in person and mind.³

¹ Austen, p. 830.

² Ibid., p. 781.

³ Ibid., p. 867.

Throughout her story Jane Austen unhesitatingly draws an equally truthful but unflattering side of Highbury's "standard of perfection."

Her tongue-in-cheek treatment of Mr. Elton's fruitless and uncomfortable walk to the home of Mr. Knightley shows her lightly ironic touch. Her concern for his being "so hot and tired" and the walk "had for nothing" is almost facetious:

. . . Such a dreadful broiling morning! I went over the fields too (speaking in a term of ill usage), which makes it so much the worse. And then not to find him at home! And no apology left, no message for me. ¹

As one reads on and discovers that the error was Mr. Elton's entirely, from the date of the meeting to its site, his anger and frustration become even pettier. His smallness is also shown in his petulant remark that the Knightley gardener had informed him that his master was "not at home," but that the cleric had refused to believe him, and the whole thing had become "a matter, therefore of very serious inconvenience" solely through Mr. Elton's misunderstanding. ²

¹ Austen, p. 1043.

² Ibid.

Mr. Elton is presented as a young man of about twenty-seven years. He was a bachelor, and was "living alone and not liking it."¹ He was always quick to "exchange any vacant evenings of his own solitude for the elegancies and society of Mr. Woodhouse's drawing-room."² He was settled comfortably in an excellent living and was ready for marriage. Emma Woodhouse also felt that he was ready, and that she had the right mate for him.

Emma informed Mr. Knightley that she proposed to engineer a marriage of Mr. Elton to Harriet. Mr. Knightley objected, saying that

Elton will not do. Elton is a very good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as anybody. Elton may talk sentimentally, but he will act rationally. . . . He is a very handsome young man, and a great favorite wherever he goes; and from his general way of talking in unreserved moments, when there are only men present, I am convinced that he does not mean to throw himself away. I have heard him speak with great animation of a large family of young ladies that his sisters are intimate with, who have all twenty thousand pounds apiece.³

No matter how broad the reader's outlook is on life in general, one finds it hard to see a clergyman

¹
Austen, p. 1043.

²
Ibid.

³
Ibid., p. 801.

shopping for the best marriage for himself with money as the main object because he would not "throw himself away."

Jane Austen has given us two examples of the planned marriage by the cleric. Both Mr. Elton and Mr. Collins had the same material end in mind, that of bettering their own parish condition in the matter of personal comfort and pleasing the patron involved. The difference lay in Mr. Collins marrying to please Lady Catherine and Mr. Elton marrying to please himself.

Mr. Collins was condescending to Elizabeth as he felt that his position under the de Bourgh patronage was superior to the Bennets'; Mr. Elton was complimentary to Emma as he felt her position was better than his, but that he was completely acceptable. Both men were most surprised and bitter to have their proposals refused.

Jane Austen very cleverly used the proposal of Mr. Elton to illustrate the social status of the clergyman. He was obviously not out of the question as a marriage prospect for the heiress, but without a doubt a little beneath her. While Mr. Collins felt that he could afford to be condescending, Mr. Elton realized that he

was acceptable but must carry his proposal on his own personable worth.

The scene in which the proposal is made and rejected is a piece of splendid writing in the reality of the affront. Emma found herself alone with Mr. Elton. She "believed he had been drinking too much of Mr. Weston's good wine, and she felt sure he would want to be talking nonsense."¹

The idea of Jane Austen handling drunkenness so calmly may not seem in keeping with the reader's concept of her times. However, in an age when all of the ladies "partook" of wine mixed with water as a regular nightcap, drinking was not a subject to be avoided at all costs by a lady-author. Swift, like Emma, was not shocked when he found a parson drunk, stating simply that

I walked here after nine, two miles, and I found a parson drunk, fighting with a seaman, and Patrick and I were so wise as to part them.²

It has been previously mentioned that Hannah More deplored the drunkenness of a parson within her parish. Mr. Elton's inebriety certainly was not a surprise to Emma.

¹ Austen, p. 841.

² Ashton, p. 432.

Emma's intuition proved correct for she found

her hand seized, her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton making violent love to her; . . . ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect, . . . very much resolved, on being seriously accepted as soon as possible.

Emma refused, quite appalled that he should be so presumptuous. As a prospect for the illegitimate Harriet

he was really a very pleasing young man, a young man any woman not fastidious might like,

and

his situation was most suitable, quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections: at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet. He had a comfortable income; for though the vicarage at Highbury was not large, he was known to have independent property;

and she thought very highly of him as

a good-humoured, well-meaning, respectable young man, without any deficiency of useful understanding or knowledge of the world.²

Jane Austen has pointed out that the eighteenth century cleric was fine for Harriet, but not for the heiress to the great house in the parish. The only clergyman who would have been unquestioningly accepted would have had to be one that had direct familial ties with the great house or a young man of "good" family.

¹
Austen, p. 841.

²
Ibid., p. 782, passim.

Mr. Elton, like Mr. Collins, spent much of his time dancing attendance upon the members of the great house. The novel tells us nothing of his activity in church duties or of his sermons. We can be assured that his church suffered in the same manner as so many of the parishes did in this era. Mr. Elton felt no compunction to write sermons; he was more ready to sit, read to Harriet and Emma, and watch while "the likeness was taken,"¹ instead of attending to parochial duties.

Another subtle barb at the casual acceptance of parochial duties by such men is in Jane Austen's handling of the trip to London to have the 'likeness' framed. No one in Highbury had the time to spend in such a trip except the rector. He was free to ride to London "at any time," and it would be impossible "to say how much he should be gratified by being employed on such an errand."²

Earlier it was pointed out that often a parson ran funerals and weddings concurrently and that children were often buried without services. Now Jane Austen reveals why the parsonage was empty when the curate was needed, and that he kept himself free for what he considered

¹ Austen, p. 788.

² Ibid., p. 790.

important matters. To the eighteenth century cleric the most important was being sure that the family in the great house was pleased with the parson.

Mr. Elton is a satisfying figure in that Jane Austen has managed to show him as the handsome youth in whom the sentimental and the mercenary blend as smoothly as courtesy and avarice blend in a pawn--broker. In the early chapters his character and his attitude toward Harriet are so deftly drawn that the reader finds him ambiguous. Jane Austen draws back the curtain completely only when he marries Miss Augusta Hawkins after his rejection by Emma. The crowning revelation is his spending the rest of his life following in the wake of Augusta's vociferousness in a blissful state of mutual admiration.

Jane Austen's setting of coming events through the incident of the portrait-sitting is brilliantly done. Harriet poses prettily, Emma paints intently, Mr. Elton attends gallantly, and Emma never suspects that his interest is a flattering tribute to herself. Neither do we, and the end result is the proposal that offends Emma and the refusal that angers Mr. Elton.

In an age where notes and letters were a vital part of the etiquette of the day, Jane Austen has given us

two examples of how the clergy, though educated, proved themselves to be crude, boorish, and sententious.

It will be remembered that Mr. Collins had written one of the world's best (or worst) examples of the insult couched in the "correct grammar and the flowery rhetoric" of the day. Mr. Elton, too, cut to the quick by Emma's affronted refusal of his proposal, retaliates with a note, addressed to her father, as Mr. Collins' letter had been to Elizabeth's sire. This one begged to be excused from an appointment in

a long civil, ceremonious note, . . . proposing to leave Highbury, . . . to spend a few weeks at Bath.¹

As Emma read the note.

she admired him for contriving it, though not able to give him much credit for the manner in which it was announced. Resentment could not have been more plainly spoken than in a civility to her father, from which she was so pointedly excluded. She had not even a share in his opening compliments. Her name was not mentioned; and there was so striking a change in all this, and such an ill-judged solemnity of leave-taking in his graceful acknowledgements, as she thought, could not escape her father's suspicion.²

¹
Austen, p. 848.

²
Ibid.

Mr. Elton's spitefulness is mean, silly, and another indication of the unsuitability of the man for his profession. This certainly was not in keeping with the behavior pattern concept one would expect from a man who was to teach his flock "to turn the other cheek." Surely Jane Austen was also stressing that anyone who could write such letters, regardless of content, could and should write brilliant sermons.

Mr. Elton's sudden decision to take a few weeks away from his pastoral duties also implies that the call of duty was very weak. Mr. Elton returned to Highbury with a bride and an added air of pique and pretension as well as an attitude of "congratulating himself on having brought such a woman to Highbury as not even Miss Woodhouse could equal."¹ Another obvious change from his previous cautious gallantry was in his "manners . . . towards Harriet. They were sneering and negligent."² It was obvious to Emma that the whole story had been repeated to the new Mrs.

¹ Austen, p. 933.

² Ibid., p. 934.

Elton "in the most unfavourable light to Emma."¹
 His shallowness is revealed in the fact that he
 "could not have suffered long"² even though he
 "had gone away rejected and mortified, . . .
 losing not only the right lady but debased to the
 level of a very wrong one! . . . but returned with
 a bride superior to the first, as under such cir-
 cumstances what is gained is to what is lost."³

Mr. Elton caps his personality and unsuitability
 for the ministry in public remarking upon hearing
 of Emma's engagement to Mr. Knightley that he

cared little about it, . . . he only hoped
 the young lady's pride would now be contented;
 and supposed she had always meant to catch ~~and~~
 Knightley if she could; and, on the point of
 living at Hartfield / Emma's home / could
 daringly exclaim "Rather he than I!"⁴

This was an eighteenth century "standard of per-
 fection" in so far as the ministry was concerned.

¹
Austen, p. 934.

²
Ibid., p. 869.

³
Ibid., p. 861.

⁴
Ibid., p. 1050.

Northanger Abbey

Northanger Abbey is Jane Austen's gay thrust at the Gothic romance that had so entranced her era. The story is light and in itself not a novel worthy of deep consideration.

However, here, as in all of her works, is the minister.

Henry Tilney is the nicest of all the Jane Austen men. . . . He has more humour. . . . As for throwing him in with Edmund and Edward simply because all three were clergymen, the notion is absurd. . . . Besides, clergyman or not, superficially Henry certainly presents a more dashing figure than either of these sober gentlemen.

Henry had a gift, . . . he was a born tease. . . . Instinct, kindness and good manners kept him from ever hurting [Catherine's] feelings; . . . he combines Crawford's intelligence and keen sense of irony, his generosity and amiability, with somewhat higher, steadier principles.¹

Tilney is shown as a conservative intellectual who assumes his pastoral duties calmly and superficially. In this he is similar to Mr. Elton but differs in that he is of "good" family. Henry, a direct result of his times, has taken over the living in the family possession as it is too good to let anyone else benefit from it. The Tilneys take exceptional care of the benefice because it is theirs. The Church remains obscurely in the background where the Tilney living is concerned.

¹ Sheila Kaye-Smith et al, Speaking of Jane Austen (New York, 1944), p. 83.

Henry Tilney, the cleric in Northanger Abbey,
was a

very gentleman-like young man. He seemed to be about four or five and twenty, was rather tall, had a pleasing countenance, a very intelligent and lively eye and, if not quite handsome, was very near it. His address was good. . . . as agreeable as Catherine had already given him credit for being. He talked with fluency and spirit, and there¹ was an archness and pleasantry in his manner.

Incongruous as it may seem, the above reference is to a minister. This young man seems to be more of a cosmopolitan socialite than a parson. In this sense he reminds us of the Howells' young Unitarian minister in The Kentons, Mr. Brecken. That young man, much like Henry Tilney, at least voiced an occasional doubt as to his qualifications for a cleric since he enjoyed the gay life as much as he did. Mr. Tilney had no such doubts. The eighteenth century was generally unconcerned and uninterested in the qualifications of a man to act as a congregational leader and as a man of worship.

Henry Tilney dances through the novel, Northanger Abbey; he has the virtues of intelligence and winning

¹
Austen, p. 1070.

manners, but they are not as dominant as his gaiety and raillery.

Mr. Tilney's casual acceptance of his curacy at Woodston is quite like what Hannah More said regarding the Cheddar vicarage, which was

in the gift of the Dean of Wells; . . . the incumbent is Mr. R., who has something to do, but I cannot find out what in the University of Oxford, where he resides.¹

Northanger Abbey has several instances of Henry's having duties at Woodston but we, like Hannah More, "cannot find out what."

Henry Tilney did not feel a strong enough sense of duty to require his being in residence at Woodston. Northanger Abbey seems to have been his home base of operations, and he leaves the family home as he "must be at Woodston on Monday to attend the parish meeting, and should probably be obliged to stay two or three days."² In taking leave of his sister at another time he states that "as tomorrow is Sunday,³ Eleanor, I shall not return."

¹ Mitton, p. 42.

² Austen, p. 1182.

³ Ibid., p. 1183.

From this we may infer that since he would be in Woodston on Saturday night he might just as well stay and deliver the Sunday sermon without the trouble of returning to Northanger Abbey and then back to Woodston in the morning.

Towards the end of a happy week at the Abbey with Catherine and Eleanor, he announces that "the engagements of his curate at Woodston [were] obliging him to leave them on Saturday for a couple of nights."¹ Henry Tilney makes it plain that he would prefer to stay at the Abbey, but as an intelligent man realizes that mores require that he conform to the basic requirements of his ministry.

Of these obligations and engagements very little can be said or developed. He never appears as a clergyman at all. One knows that he goes to Woodston regularly and perhaps spends the bulk of his time there, but considers the Abbey his home.

Geraldine Mitton in discussing Henry Tilney said that "Of clerical avocation we also hear so very little that he might almost have been of any other profession."²

¹
Austen, p. 1189.

²
Mitton, p. 47.

It is a sad commentary on the eighteenth century ministry that the vocation was so casually practiced that it was unrecognizable. It is just as sad, but undeniably true, that Jane Austen's presentation of Henry Tilney is an accurate one of the wealthy family that keeps a benefice within its grasp and considers the Church as part of its personal wealth.

General Tilney, Henry's father, discussed with Catherine Morland the Woodston parish and admitted that "there [were]¹ few country parsonages in England half so good." In fact, he added, it could be said

to have many recommendations. The house stands among fine meadows facing south-east, with an excellent kitchen garden in the same aspect; the walls surrounding which I built myself about ten years ago, for the benefit of my son. It is a family living, Miss Morland: and, the property in the place being chiefly my own, you may well believe I take care that it shall not be a bad one. Did Henry's income depend solely on this living, he would not be ill provided for.²

¹ Austen, p. 1184.

² Ibid., p. 1161.

It is a strange set of affairs when the church property becomes the private domain of the monied families and the parson a mere figurehead kept to make the possession legal. This was the state of secular affairs where the church was concerned, and Jane Austen made no attempt to gloss them over or to hide them.

Persuasion

Persuasion was "begun on 8 August 1815 and finished on 6 August 1816 (Jane Austen's Memorandum)."¹ In this very short novel Jane Austen presents a girl in such a light that she has the reader's sympathy throughout the story.

. . . Persuasion is held by many readers to be unique in its revelation of depths below the tranquil scene.²

This is Anne Elliot's story, but here, as in every aspect of eighteenth century life, there is a minister.

In Persuasion there are two ministers, but neither is important to the plot, and Jane Austen's treatment of them is slight, even though revealing. A third parson is referred to only as the vehicle of introduction for the return of Anne's long-lost lover, Captain Wentworth.

The embryo-cleric Charles Hayter and the aged, ~~but~~ conscientious, Dr. Shirley show two extremes in the Church roster: Hayter as the young aspirant "bustling and peeping after preferment," and Dr. Shirley as a Woodforde-type, who, content with his life, clung tenaciously to his duties.

¹ A. Walton Litz, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development (New York, 1965), p. 179.

² Kaye-Smith, p. 269.

In Persuasion the roles of the clergymen are minor. Jane Austen reveals, just as Edmund Gosse had written, that while little was known of the how and why of becoming a minister the assurance of having a 'living'¹ was the prime requisite.

The aged cleric, Dr. Shirley, in this novel is an excellent gentleman, but Henrietta Musgrove, fiancée of his curate, feels that it would be a splendid idea for him "to take his health" at the Lyme seaside. This would permit her fiancé, Charles Hayter, to assume his duties; and their marriage would be likely to take place sooner:

My doubt is whether anything could persuade him to leave his parish. He is so very strict and scrupulous in his notions; overscrupulous I must say. . . . it is quite a mistaken point of conscience, when a clergyman sacrifices his health for the sake of duties which may be just as well performed by another person.²

This is facetious writing on Jane Austen's part. Is she condemning or praising the clergy as presented by Dr. Shirley? Is she slyly pointing out that, although "for more than forty years he had been zealously discharging

¹
Gosse, p. 154.

²
Austen, p. 1271.

all the duties of his office,"¹ the novice, Charles Hayter, could replace him with no difficulty or loss? Is she laughing about the fact that personal well-being is much more important than the conscientious discharge of the duties of a man of God? It may be all of these are points that she wished to make.

Fortunately for Dr. Shirley, he was not pushed into making a decision as Charles "had been applied to by a friend to hold a living for a youth who could not possibly claim it under many years."² Although Charles and Henrietta were grateful for this preferment, and it certainly made their early marriage possible, this holding of a living until the scion of a great family was ready for it put the lesser clergy into a position of servility. Jane Austen makes Charles' position clear, but more subtly than Mitton does in her remarks on this church problem:

Archbishop Secker, in his charges to the clergy of the diocese of Oxford, when he was their Bishop in 1737, throws a very clear light on this side of the question. He expressly enjoins the incumbents

¹ Austen, p. 1256.

² Ibid., p. 1342.

to make no promise to their patrons to quit the benefices when desired before entering the office. "The true meaning therefore is to commonly enslave the incumbent to the will and pleasure of the patron. The motive for demanding such a promise was generally that some raw young lad, a nephew or a younger son of the lord of the manor, was ready to take it." The evils of such a system are but too apparent. We can imagine a nervous clergyman who would never dare express an opinion contrary to the will of the benefactor who had the power to turn him into the world penniless; we can imagine the time-server courting his patron with honied words. ¹

Both Mr. Collins and Charles Hayter were in this situation. Hayter in accepting this preferment was assured of an income for several years with no foreseen problems and "almost the certainty of something more permanent long before the time in question."² Jane Austen elaborates on this point by explaining that Charles, in this living, would be in contact with several squires that had preferments within their gift. He could easily win their friendship and their patronage if he would overcome his "coolness about sporting."³ Here Jane Austen delicately stresses the

¹ Mitton, p. 34.

² Austen, p. 1342.

³ Ibid.

fact that the parson must be a welcome companion for his patron. She is saying what Arthur Young did in his statement that there were

numberless instances where clergymen spent mornings scampering after the hounds, dedicating evenings to the bottle and reel from inebriety to the pulpit,¹

presumably in the company of their patron. The situation bears resemblance to Cowper's line that "The parson knows enough who knows a duke."²

Persuasion has the affected aristocrat Sir Walter, Anne's father, revealing his contempt for the occupants of a parsonage. Sir Walter quite obviously would not accept a rector as "fit company for any man's table." When the connection of a past curate of their parish with the proposed tenants of his manor was revealed and the curate recollected, he exclaimed:

Ah, ay! Mr. Wentworth the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term gentleman. I thought you were speaking of a³ man of property. Mr. Wentworth was nobody.

Mr. Wentworth plays a very minor role in this novel, serving only to link Anne's past with her present, but

¹ Mitton, p. 37.

² Cowper, p. 251.

³ Austen, p. 1342.

Jane Austen deftly uses him to reveal another facet of pastoral existence in her century.

The lawyer Shepherd handling the rental transaction for Sir Walter felt compelled to explain what he knew personally of Mr. Wentworth. He stated that he

knew the gentleman; seen him a hundred times; came to consult me once, . . . about a farmer's man, breaking into his orchard; wall torn down; apples stolen; caught in the fact, and afterwards, contrary to my judgement, submitted to an amicable compromise. ¹

Obviously the barrister could never concede to the lion and the lamb lying down together, or to the insult of having his professional advice ignored by, of all people, a parson. This incident of the apple orchard may seem trivial to the modern reader, but it is most revealing of the excellent qualities of the curate when it is recalled that

parishes were created in the sixth and following centuries. We find that the parish priest had land or a farm given to him for his support. ²

The crime was one of usurping a means of support rather

¹
Austen, p. 1223.

²
P. J. Lyden, Ready Answers in Canon Law (New York, 1954), p. 64.

than a simple one of trespass, and the curate's decision to compromise rather than to punish is the correct one in our concept of how a man of the cloth should react to personal affront. In doing so he was teaching the religious precepts of our age. To the eighteenth century lawyer this was an inconceivable and ridiculous view of life, even for a parson.

Conclusion

Once the authenticity of Jane Austen's clergy is established, the reader can scan through any work published in her time and find a counterpart for the character of her parson. Most fictions and histories about the church of the eighteenth century have factual accounts of the man and the condition, which tally with the clerics that Jane Austen portrayed.

With realism and truth she depicted a small but complete range of clergy-personalities and clergy-abilities. With clear-eyed realism she showed the conditions under which the clergy had to serve and how the inner strength of each man was affected by his environment and circumstances.

The earliest novelist of manners had been primarily concerned with the general aspects of character. From the point of view of an individual's development an act is more significant in its inception than in its translation into external fact. From the point of view of society in general, only the completed act counts. Intent upon a representative picture of society, the novelist of manners had been in the habit of dealing with action in its performance and only incidentally or analytically with its origination. The individual thus cut off from the true springs of his conduct was of less vital interest in himself than in his contribution to general truth.

Naturally the possibilities of such a character were limited. His depth was soon plumbed and, since there was a limit to the effectiveness of repetition, the author had to base his appeal upon the variety rather than the subtlety of his characters.

• • • • •
 Just as the characters are typical members of their class stations so are their actions typical of human nature.

• • • • •
 We could not find it easy, even if it were desirable, to read every man's character at a glance and judge his every act. Fiction in which such simple and immediate judgement is possible does not picture reality as it is. It sacrifices the particular in the interest of the general.

• • • • •
 Jane Austen had little of the eighteenth century taste for generalizations. . . . She managed for the most part to create the effect of leaving the characters to themselves; not exhibiting them like so many puppets but arranging situations in which they could reveal themselves for better or worse.¹

Most readers prefer realistic presentations because it is easier to understand. They ask that actions be recognizable without effort on their part, yet intelligent readers know that realism is not truth in its entirety. Reality in representing man may be psychologically truthful, as it applies to the basic concerns common to all men. This was a view that Jane

1

Bruce McCullough, Representative English Novelists: Defoe to Conrad (New York, 1946), pp. 107-109, passim.

Austen understood. Hence she managed to depict clergymen who acted as one would expect them to, in view of the situations in which Jane Austen placed them. Whether a novelist admires or ridicules a part of his society is not as vital as the fact that in writing about the segment he is reflecting a current or common view of that particular segment, as he sees it. The value of this mirroring of what the novelist sees is the hope that those most intimately concerned will avail themselves of this mirrored viewpoint to correct, if in error, or enhance, the image that they are presenting to society.

Jane Austen has deservedly earned the reputation of "gentle ironist," but this ability has served her purpose well in giving us clear pictures of the clergy of the half century in which she lived. The reader is never sure as to Jane Austen's personal opinions of the clerics she has presented.

Jane Austen did not assume that realism consisted of minute descriptions of bodily functions or intimate personal contacts; but she could create a living human being, put him on her stage as a clergyman, and let him live. She never ignored the individual's needs in the interest of a representative picture of society. She never stereotyped a clergyman. No two of her parsons were of the same mold. Each has so many facets of personality that he is unique. Each speaks his lines with authenticity.

Jane Austen lets the reader see and feel the undercurrents and the complicated interplay of motives in the lives of her clerics:

. . . that everything [in her novels] should be set forth lightly does not lessen its fidelity to life or detract from its profound significance. The mirror which the author holds up to nature provides an image of truth.¹

Jane Austen has this same depth of realism in the dialogue of her clergy. Each man has a separate, distinct, and individual voice. What he says fits him perfectly, and what he says is in keeping with

¹ McCullough, p. 112.

the viewpoint that is natural for him with his background and training. Each parson talks like a parson, but each one would find it impossible to take the thoughts and vocalization of another Austen-parson for his own. His speech describes him psychologically, and it helps place him in his proper perspective in the total scheme of her novel. Her clergy are life-size and life-like. These depictions are another indication of her accurate observation and knowledge of the clergy of her times.

Her sensitive finger on humanity's pulse was an unerring guide in establishing that character must take precedent over incident. Her parsons lived their lives through process, hour by hour, not through incident upon incident. She did not throw a spotlight upon her clergy; she let their light shine from within, and consequently their living of their pasts and futures becomes transparent to the reader.

It may be added that her clergy never acted inconsistently once their pattern of behavior was established. They are so real and natural that one never questions, although one may not approve or appreciate, the logic of what they do or say.

Frederick Faverty comments that "so much is Jane Austen's an art of concealing that her contemporaries thought she had none."¹ This art, or to use a more modern term, style, was so pliable and simple that in a few marvelous little speeches she could tell us all we needed to know a character intimately. Her perfect ear, sense of timing, and shrewd instinct for anti-climax make much of her dialogue ready for the stage as it stands. This is truly "art."

It may be pointed out unhesitatingly that each Jane Austen character is a distinct, unique personality, and that each is an integral part of her whole. Her rare talent made each one live. They are ordinary people in the sense that we all can find counterparts among our own acquaintances. Her genius lies in the fact that her characters do not bore us. Those we know personally could not hold our interest for the length of a novel, or, in greater compliment, for the duration of more than a century of readers.

Her fine hand and eye never neglected the delicate change in tone of a character's personality growth. The progress from virtue to human frailty, selfishness

¹ Frederick E. Faverty, Your Literary Heritage (Philadelphia, 1959), p.96.

to generosity, or repentance to jealousy are all handled with exquisite craftsmanship.

Jane Austen had the rare talent for discrimination of her own values. She could be merciless, but she would not change any part of her character's personality or any part of a scene to emphasize her own point. She loved her small world and was happy and satisfied to write of it as it appeared to her.

As a realist she knew instinctively the importance of "minding her manners" in relation to her characters. She believed that manners were the basis of man's being and the mirror of man's experience. In examining her characters' manners, one discovers the personality, mores, and dreams of the speakers. Their verbal traits and mannerisms reveal how they form their judgements and how they behave.

Jane Austen lived with her characters and so do we. No Austen character is truly repulsive, although one readily notices that some have some nonsensical notions. She detected the absurdities in the people one knows, and part of one's love of them is the complete acceptance of these absurdities as fitting the character established.

Jane Austen was showing to all of England what was wrong with England's clergy. The fact that she used society's own mirror is another tribute to her astuteness.

The Austen tools of irony, satire, ridicule and appreciation have served her purpose well. Through her art and her realism one does not see the clergy as Parson Trullibers of the pig-sties, but neither does one consider them all as Aeschylus-reading Parson Adams. In her realistic depiction of the men who served the eighteenth century church, one does not find the gentle resignation of the Vicar of Wakefield nor the gracious portrait of Addison's Chaplain who served Sir Roger de Coverley.

Her clergy are honestly portrayed as not being strong enough to influence or change the way of their particular province. Nowhere does she take the eighteenth century parson out of character by giving him strength that is not reflected in the records of her times. She never forgot that people in high and middle society treated the cleric with disdain. Remembering this she never let her clergy step out of

the pattern of her times by giving them influence they did not have.

Her truthfulness was too late for her century's pomp and circumstance and too early for nineteenth century realism, but her "gentle irony" added her protests to Church conditions and can take credit for some of the reform that has taken place since she laid down her pen. Less than a decade after her death a number of

legislative measures were passed which sought to remedy some of the anachronisms and evils which were handicapping the Church.

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 A striking feature of the Church of England in the nineteenth century was the marked improvement in the quality of the clergy. . . . A great advance was seen in the preparation for the ministry.¹

Jane Austen did not write solely to improve the ministry or as a novelist of social criticism, but one can be sure that she objected to the ease with which an unqualified man could become a minister in her day.

¹ Latourette, pp. 282-285, passim.

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