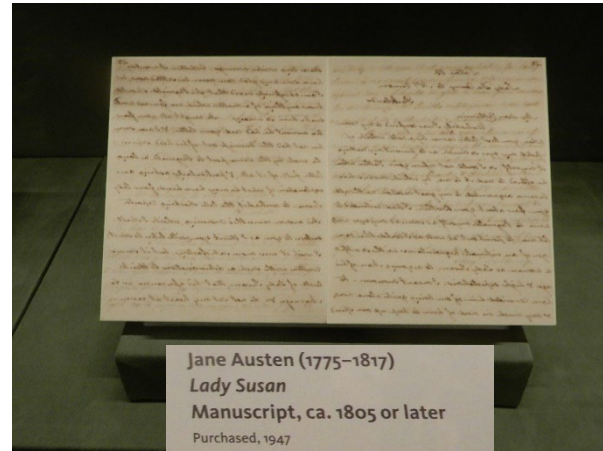


“A” IS FOR ...

Jane Austen (1775-1817)



Jane Austen (JA), English novelist and astute observer of human conduct and character, lived a quiet and all-too-brief life, producing merely six completed novels, several compositions of 'Juvenilia,' many brief historical sketches, and thousands of letters, mostly to her sister who destroyed 2/3 of them before her own death. Nevertheless, the products of JA's pen remain respected, even beloved, more than 200 years after her death. Jane was born on December 16, 1775 in Steventon, a village in Hampshire, England where her father George was rector of St. Nicholas Church. She was the 7th child of 8; six brothers and one older sister, Cassandra, completed the family tree. The two sisters were mostly educated at home by their father and older brothers, although they did have two brief episodes of formal schooling. The first started in spring of 1783 in Oxford, but when the school's mistress moved them to Southampton that summer, the sisters became ill and were sent home. In 1785 the girls attended the Abbey School in Reading, but returned home in less than a year and thereafter continued their independent studies happily at home.

When Jane was 16 her father moved the family to Bath; by that time, only the daughters remained at home. The little family lived in Bath until Rev. Austen's death in 1805. Then began a period of insecure housing and anxiety for the women, who moved first to Clifton, and then to Southampton, often having extended stays with relatives or close friends. In 1809, Jane's older brother Edward, now Edward Austen Knight, offered them a large cottage on some estate land he had inherited, in Chawton. The three women gratefully moved to their new home and in that lovely and secure place Jane's writing flourished. She revised, completed and sold *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). *Northanger Abbey*, completed in 1789, sold in 1803 but was not published and eventually re-purchased by JA. It was published, along with *Persuasion*, late in 1817 or early 1818, after Jane's death.

The Austen family was close, and Jane and her sister Cassandra were utterly devoted to each other. The last eight years of JA's life were by all accounts happy, quietly productive, the serene rhythm of Chawton home life punctuated by occasional visits to or from relatives or close

friends. Sometime in 1816 the author began experiencing symptoms of 'decay,' as her brother Henry later reported. In May 1817, JA moved to Winchester to seek advanced medical care; sadly, two months later, on July 18, she died and was buried July 24th in Winchester Cathedral.

MORALIZED TIME LINE

The Austen family, as noted above, was close-knit and happy. They were not wealthy; a rector's living would not have afforded much luxury and Mr. Austen supplemented their income by taking in boarding students whom he taught. Evening entertainments at home were lively – word games, charades, theatricals. Although Jane and her sister had scant formal education, reading, thinking and thoughtful conversation were highly valued in the family, as was the excellent family library. Neighborhood dinners, dances and musical performances provided more varied activities, although one expects that the Austens were intimately familiar with most everyone in their neighborhood. One can see these themes sketched throughout the novels: literary and linguistic prowess, deep appreciation of good books, 'merriment' and good humor, economy and industry, kindness, sensibility - these traits, or lack thereof, define the main characters and provide critique of many minor ones.

Life for the Austens, especially the unmarried Jane and Cassandra and their mother, changed abruptly when Jane was 30 years old and Mr. Austen died. This deep loss ushered in, for the three gentlewomen, a period of several years of moving around with little income. Unmarried, 'unprotected' women of small means often suffered housing insecurity and real poverty. These concerns are reflected throughout the novels, most directly in *Sense and Sensibility* (S&S): the patriarch, Mr. Dashwood, dies at the beginning of the novel and since the estate in which the family lives will, by law, be inherited by Mr. Dashwood's son by prior marriage, his current wife and three daughters are obliged to seek another home, with little money and even less help. *Pride and Prejudice* (P&P) explores another aspect of precarious housing: the Bennet's estate is entailed on Mr. Bennet's cousin Mr. Collins; if Mr. Bennet dies before Mrs. Bennet does, the latter and their five daughters will be obliged to move out to make way for Mr. Collins.

Persuasion (P) highlights yet one more peril: Sir Walter, the patriarch, has squandered the family wealth and can no longer afford to live in the high style he believes he deserves; he and his three unmarried daughters must 'retrench,' rent out the estate and move to Bath, a place more suitable and 'less dangerous' (though decidedly less elegant) for a man in his position.

Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (MP) depends almost entirely on her uncle's generosity and protection, a position which becomes precarious when she refuses a marriage proposal. *Emma* presents a different domestic arrangement: Emma is 'handsome, clever and rich,' queen of her father's home; she is the only Austen heroine to be untroubled by financial issues. (Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* (NA) is young and starts her adventure from her parents' home; there is no threat to her housing.) Austen herself wrote in a letter: "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony."

JA has been criticized for ignoring the 'big events' in her world, in particular the ongoing war with Napoleon and France that dominated the English Regency period of Austen's life.

Although the war is not directly confronted, it and other pressing concerns of 'the larger world' comprise central roles in all the major novels. This will be explored later in discussion of domains of conscience. JA wrote about what she knew best, and Anna Quindlen (Truth

Universally Acknowledged, p. 103) notes that Austen's focus on the enduring issues of 'social pressure and gender politics' threaded through the works keeps the novels current and compelling. Wealth, status, work, concerns of the larger world, do occupy central parts of the novels, but it is JA's empathic scrutiny of character and conduct, moral decision-making and dilemma resolution, that lie at the center of each novel and compel the hearts of her heroines and villains.

CONSCIENCE DOMAINS [INTRINSIC VALUES]

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONSCIENCE [MORAL MEANING MAKING]:

In MP, we find:

Fanny Price (to **Henry Crawford**): We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.
(MP, p.331).

In P&P Miss **Elizabeth** Bennet and Mr. **Darcy** dance at the Ball at Netherfield:

Darcy: May I ask to what these questions tend?

Elizabeth: Merely to the illustration of *your* character (*endeavoring to shake off her gravity*). I am trying to make it out.

Darcy: And what is your success?

Elizabeth (shaking her head): I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly.

Darcy (answering gravely): I can readily believe that reports may vary greatly with respect to me; and I could wish, Miss Bennet, that you were not to sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either.

Elizabeth: But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity.
(P&P, p. 90)

Elizabeth here is struggling to acquire a theory of Darcy's mind, using her moral imagination to develop a 'sketch' of this man who so frustrates and intrigues her. She is quite 'dissatisfied' with the encounter.

JA is often referred to as a 'moral' writer, a writer concerned with how a person achieves or retrieves goodness in life, a focus some consider the very essence of good literature (Indiana University Conscience Project, 2009). Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (p.243) suggests that JA is one of 'the last great representative[s] of the classical tradition of the virtues.' Indeed, the novels abound with references to virtues and each novel explores what MacIntyre refers to as 'the very restricted cultural and social space' in which a woman, in JA's lifetime, could live a virtuous life. Austen praises sense and restraint, patience and forbearance, compassion and

humor, amiability and integrity, constancy and courage. Self-knowledge, painfully acquired, is required for at least four of her heroines to achieve happiness; the pain is not a battering though, but rather a loving corrective usually illumined or even provided by a trusted figure. Throughout her writings, one can sense her ironic humor as well as criticism of, but also her affection for and allegiance to, her characters. One can imagine this young woman, only 41 when she died, observing, exploring, critiquing, living with and loving the neighborhood's Elinors and Mariannes, Emmas, Elizabeths, Fannys and Annes, Mr. Bennet and 'his lady,' the Reverends Collins and Eltons, the Bates, and all the rest; one can imagine with what care and joy JA helped them 'achieve all they deserve.' JA's expertise in character study and moral dilemma resolution shows us how to apply, to ourselves, the same expertise in understanding our personal conscience.

MORALIZED ATTACHMENT [CONNECTEDNESS]: The novels highlight many close and enduring relationships, effectively depicting what is called in this conscience domain the 'security-empathy-oughtness link': sisterly devotion in *S&S* and *P&P*, daughterly devotion in *Emma*, patient and persistent, seemingly unrequited, attachment in *MP* and *P*.

In *S&S*, **Marianne** and **Elinor** converse following the public disclosure of Edward's engagement to Lucy, a heart-breaking secret Elinor has kept, bound by her promise to Lucy:

Marianne: How long has this been known to you, Elinor? Has he written to you?

Elinor: I have known it these four months. When Lucy first came to Barton Park last November, she told me in confidence of her engagement.

Marianne (astonished, wondering): Four months! Have you known of this four months?

Elinor confirmed it.

Marianne: What! While attending me in all my misery, has this been on your heart? And I have reproached you for being happy! ...Four months! And yet you loved him!

Elinor: Yes, but I did not love only him; and while the comfort of others was dear to me, I was glad to spare them from knowing how much I felt.

(*S&S*, p.202-3)

The longer passage describes Elinor's constant efforts at 'self-command,' wishing to spare Marianne and their mother any sense of her own unhappiness while being unable to speak of Edward's prior engagement. Elinor's extraordinary empathic efforts describe moral emotional responsiveness as well as attachment. "Empathy finds its home within the domain of Moralized Attachment and its place of work within the domain of Moral Emotional Responsiveness (MER)." (Psychobiology). More on MER in the next section.

In *P&P* we read a tender exchange between Jane and Elizabeth, concluding with:

Elizabeth: My dear Jane! ... you are too good. Your sweetness and disinterestedness are really angelic; I do not know what to say to you. I feel as if I had never done you justice, or loved you as you deserve.
(*P&P* p. 128)

When Emma and Mr. Knightley declare their love and desire to marry, one major issue stands in the way of happiness: her father, Mr. Woodhouse, who esteems Knightley but whose age and habits would not easily adapt to the loss of his daughter's constant presence or to a move to Mr. Knightley's home, Donwell Abbey. Emma, for all her faults, is devoted to her father and declares that as long as he lives, she 'could never quit him.' Knightley understands, and his own deep attachment to both daughter and father lead him to move into Emma's home for as long as her father lives.

Austen also explores the painful disconnects within families: Mr. Bennet's attempts to remove himself from his family's affairs and his disrespectful teasing of his silly wife, the mean treatment of Anne Elliot by her father and elder sister, the snubs by snobby Emma to Ms. Bates and the Bertram sisters to young Fanny, Edward Ferrars' disinheritance by his spiteful mother.

MORAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS [BALANCE/HARMONY]:

As noted in the previous section, Elinor's commitment to self-restraint and struggle for emotional equanimity contrast with Marianne's exuberant emotionality. As depicted in *S&S* (p.44), in the early days of Marianne's developing attachment to Willoughby, Marianne showed "the most pointed assurance of her affection." Elinor was not surprised that the relationship was developing but worried about the impropriety of such open displays of affection, especially after such a short acquaintance. "... [Elinor] once or twice did venture to suggest the propriety of some self-command to Marianne. But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve..." To do so "appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to ...mistaken notions." Marianne's un-tempered grief and despair at Willoughby's defection lead to a very serious illness, one for which, in a conversation with Elinor, she later acknowledges she bears significant responsibility:

Marianne: I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave. My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died, it would have been self-destruction.
(*S&S*, pp.269)

Marianne continues this conversation by promising to spend her [future] days studying music and reading, to express gratitude for the many kindnesses of her family and friends – that is, she intends to make amends.

In *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse has a very different experience of moral emotions and making amends. In a pivotal scene near the end of the novel, Emma insults Miss Bates at the picnic on Box Hill, a nearly unforgiveable breach of social (class) etiquette not to mention an incredible unkindness. Mr. Knightley, ever her honest friend, confronts her as they are leaving the picnic:

Knightley: How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age and situation?

Emma blushes in acknowledgement but remains silent.

While they talked they were advancing towards the carriage; it was ready; and, before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted, and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification and deep concern. She had not been able to speak; and on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome; ...She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed – almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, so mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!... (*Emma*, p. 345)

Emma returns home, unhappy and unsettled. How to process what has happened, how can she proceed with friends whose good opinions of her have been shaken? And what of Miss Bates?

A whole evening of backgammon with her father was felicity to it. *There*, indeed, lay real pleasure, for there she was giving the sweetest hours of the twenty-four to his comfort; and feeling that, unmerited as might be the degree of his fond affection and confiding esteem, she could not, in her general conduct, be open to any severe reproach. As a daughter, she hoped she was not without a heart.... Miss Bates should never again – no never! If attention in future could do away the past she might hope to be forgiven. She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be no more. In the warmth of true contrition she would call upon her the very next morning, and it should be the beginning, on her side, of a regular, equal, kindly intercourse. (*Emma*, p.346)

JA's depiction of amendatory and reparative strategies coupled with her characters' declarations of motivational inner states is a subtle but effective invitation to her readers to cultivate this aspect of the domain of moral emotional responsiveness in their own lives.

MORAL VALUATION [WORTH]: One of the greatest gifts of Austen's novels is the ability to watch her characters (mostly female) struggle with moral questions, to engage moral sensitivity

and reasoning, and to grow. Marianne is astonished to learn that Elinor has known about Edward's engagement for several months; Elinor reminds her gently that since Lucy told her in strictest confidence Elinor could not break her word; confidentiality and promise keeping are explicitly valued. Similarly, Elinor's valiant efforts to hide her own heartbreak from her sister and mother reflect Elinor's commitment to beneficence and non-maleficence.

In *P&P* Elizabeth and Jane offer another example. Shortly after Elizabeth returns home from an extended visit with Charlotte, Mr. Collins, and unexpectedly Mr. Darcy, she shares with Jane some part of the remarkable letter Darcy wrote to Elizabeth in which he "lay[s] before you the whole of his [Wickham's] connection with my family." (p.188) The letter detailed Wickham's lack of principles or commitment to a profession, his idleness and finally his attempted seduction of Darcy's young sister. Elizabeth converses with Jane:

Elizabeth: There is one point on which I want your advice. I want to be told whether I ought, or ought not, to make our acquaintances in general understand Wickham's character.

Jane (pausing briefly): Surely there can be no occasion for exposing him so dreadfully. What is your own opinion?

Elizabeth: That it ought not to be attempted. Mr. Darcy has not authorized me to make his communication public. On the contrary, every particular relative to his sister was meant to be kept as much as possible to myself; and if I endeavor to undeceive people as to the rest of his conduct, who will believe me? The general prejudice against Mr. Darcy is so violent that it would be the death of half the good people in Meryton to attempt to place him in an amiable light. I am not equal to it. Wickham will soon be gone... At present I will say nothing about it.

Jane: You are quite right. To have his errors made public might ruin him forever. He is now, perhaps, sorry for what he has done, and anxious to re-establish his character. We must not make him desperate.

(*P&P*, p.212)

Again, confidentiality is invoked, but here it vies with honesty and a desire to protect innocent, or at least unknowing, others. Jane, ever the kind optimist, hopes Wickham may reform and does not wish to further disturb him, and Elizabeth cannot imagine a way to inform their friends without exposing Darcy. The sisters engage in a kind of 'value matrix' (see notes), in which they propose a course of action – to share the truth about Wickham – and then debate their best reasons to pursue the action as well as their best reasons NOT to pursue it. In the end, Elizabeth concludes that the better course is to stay quiet about Wickham; he will soon quit the neighborhood and her reasons for revealing his true character are weaker than her reasons not to. Of course, neither sister could possibly have foreseen how Wickham would complicate their lives.

JA also explicitly values self-knowledge. Marianne's post-illness resolutions, and Emma's self-recriminations after Knightley's criticism are two examples.

In *P&P* Elizabeth also undergoes painful self-awareness. Early on, she had taken an eager interest in Wickham and enjoyed his attentions: "His countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in the possession of every virtue." (p.194). However, she cannot actually *remember* any virtuous act he had done. After she reads Darcy's letter a few times she reflects:

How despicably I have acted! ... I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candor of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! yet how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity not love has been my folly... Till this moment I never knew myself.
(*P&P*, p.196)

"Self-knowledge is for Jane Austen both an intellectual and a moral virtue, and it is closely allied to another virtue which Jane Austen makes central..." (MacIntyre, p.241). That other virtue is constancy, and **it** is required "to make of a human life a unity." (MacIntyre). More on constancy in the next section, Moral Volition.

MORAL VOLITION [FREEDOM]: Timid Fanny Price (*MP*) and sober Anne Elliot (*P*) frequently have been described as JA's least attractive heroines. Yet, it is these two who most heroically choose against their own comfort, demonstrating courage and the virtue of constancy that links "in an ethical life the commitments and responsibilities to the future springing from past episodes in which obligations were conceived and debts assumed [which] unite the present to past and to future..." (MacIntyre, 242). Moralized attachment and moral volition overlap, as conscience domains so often do, and each woman strives to create/maintain a unified narrative of her life. Anne and Fanny recognize a kind of threat to their very selves and rather than capitulating to the threat, or allure, of physical comfort and safety, Fanny and Anne hold fast to the virtues that have defined their lives.

Both women are vulnerable, and both exist a little outside the world of the novels' action. Thus, both are able to see deception, and self-deception more easily.

In MP, Fanny's immediate family of 9 siblings is very poor; she, however, has lived with wealthy relations for ten years, feels their generosity, and wishes to express her gratitude. She helps with various household chores, dutifully attends her indolent Aunt, tries to keep her two female cousins out of trouble. And she falls in love with her cousin Edmund, the secret of her heart; however, a union with Edmund seems impossible. When Fanny is wooed by the rakish Henry Crawford, on a whim, her Uncle Sir Thomas is pleased – a way to marry Fanny into wealth and status, a way to discharge his own obligations toward Fanny. Astonishing her Uncle, she rejects Henry's offer of marriage:

Sir Thomas: Am I to understand that you intend to *refuse* Mr. Crawford?

Fanny: Yes Sir.

Sir Thomas: For what reason?

Fanny: I – I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him.

Sir Thomas (trying again a few minutes later): Have you any reason, child, to think ill of Mr. Crawford's temper?

Fanny: No, Sir. (*longing to add 'but of his principles I have...'*)
(MP, pp.252-54).

Henry's changing attitudes and behavior, especially toward herself, unsettle and displease her, and Fanny has witnessed his insincere, improper advances to her married cousin Maria. Fanny is well aware that in refusing Crawford she is rejecting material security and comfort for herself, for her family, and is seriously displeasing her Uncle. Indeed, Sir Thomas is very angry which adds to Fanny's distress, and although she weeps desperately and apologizes earnestly, she does not reconsider her answer. Accepting Henry Crawford would unite her with a man she could not respect or trust, and thus would demean herself in her own eyes. At this point, Fanny has little hope for a union with Edmund, or perhaps anyone, but better to save her soul/conscience/self-respect and forfeit material comfort.

In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot is in a different situation. Eight years before the novel begins, 19-year-old Anne had been engaged to the love of her life, the spirited, gallant naval commander Frederick Wentworth. Her father and close friend Lady Russell objected to the marriage, primarily because of Anne's family, the patriarch of which was a baronet with social status; Frederick was neither titled nor wealthy. Anne was persuaded to break the engagement for the sake of duty to family and, it was suggested, for Wentworth's sake. Anne now regrets that decision. "She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession... she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement..." (pp.32-3) Another man offers marriage three years later, Lady Russell approves, but now Anne 'had left nothing for advice to do' and refused him. At age 27, youth and beauty faded, ignored and dismissed by father and sister, Wentworth re-enters the scene and almost does not recognize her. They barely speak – he silent, still angry, she reserved, still attached. Cousin William Elliot, heir to the Elliot estate (Anne's family home) unexpectedly begins to woo Anne; like Fanny, Anne cannot understand the sudden change in

his behavior toward her and her family, the family he so recently had dismissed as exceedingly disagreeable. She finds him pleasant but too changeable, not open, and cannot trust him. Lady Russell urges acceptance based on family duty and because she worries about Anne's future. However, even though Anne has little hope that she and Wentworth can renew their relationship, Elliot's lack of constancy and her own continued attachment to Wentworth require her to refuse. Again, the choice is material comfort with moral qualms, or a calm conscience in melancholy, genteel poverty.

In *Persuasion* in a pivotal scene near the end, Anne and Wentworth's good friend Capt. Harville are discussing whether men or women are more constant in their relationships. Anne says,

Anne: We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us.

Capt. Harville (disagreeing): ...I will not allow it to be more man's nature than woman's to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved.

They continue for a while, trying without success to convince each other that man or woman is more constant.

Anne: No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives...All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.

(*Persuasion*, pp.219-22)

Wentworth overhears and pens a letter straight from his heart to hers:

Wentworth: I can listen no longer in silence...You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant.

(*Persuasion*, p.223)

Fanny and Anne choose and act according to their own moral lights. They have no real support, no trusted confidant, no one to champion them. Yet, each **must** choose a path that will allow her to live a life she can affirm as good, to practice the virtues she values, to honor commitments past and present, to recognize herself. Constancy requires and enables the choosing – “to make of a human life a unity;” further, without constancy “all the other virtues to some degree lose their point.” (MacIntyre, 242)

In the end, JA rewards Anne and Fanny, Elinor, Marianne, Jane, Elizabeth and Emma – after each heroine struggles through anxiety, self-doubt, grief, and loss, there is for each, if not

perfect happiness, at least better understanding of self and others, a calm conscience, and an amiable partner to share her life.

IMAGES:

Jane Austen's writing desk at Chawton, visited June 12, 2012, photograph by MG2.

Only existing handwritten novel by Jane Austen, exhibit in Morgan Museum, NYC, visited March 17, 2017, composite photograph by MG2

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