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The Personal Element in Jane Austen's Treatment of Her Heroines

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THE PERSONAL ELEMENT IN JANE AUSTEN'S
TREATMENT OF HER HEROINES

by

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CHAPTER I

THE EARLIER HEROINES

I like to think of Miss Jane Austen on the day she visited the British Art Museum. On that unusual occasion I imagine she walked rather briskly past a number of pictures, and glanced at a good many others in a rather matter-of-fact way. I am certain that few, if any of the other visitors there, however, escaped her keen glance. She was attending "more to the company than the sight."¹ As for the pictures themselves, she was looking for a portrait of Elizabeth Bennet, whom she rather imagined would be wearing yellow. Though she found no Elizabeth among the paintings, she did see her beautiful and charming sister Jane in a picture as like her as life. Now, Jane was a lovely person who had none of Elizabeth's faults. She was an altogether perfect, gentle, and loving girl who saw only the good in everyone.

That is why it was Elizabeth and not her sister who is the heroine of Pride and Prejudice, for Jane Austen did not like "pictures of perfection".² This antipathy was

¹William Austen-Leigh and Richard A. Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1913), p. 245, 267-8.

²Ibid., p. 352.

particularly characteristic of her when she wrote her earlier novels, Pride and Prejudice, finished in 1797, when she was only twenty-one, Sense and Sensibility, finished in 1798, and Northanger Abbey in 1803. In these books one critic sees the "parody and hardness of youth" in the "work of a precocious, shrewd, and satirical girl of genius, whose amazing gifts for farce and caricature, though suited for a satiric story like Northanger Abbey, display themselves almost too glaringly in works with larger and more human themes"¹ (such as Pride and Prejudice.) This criticism of the earlier novels comes from a man who admits he is himself a "Mansfield Parker", which I consider an explanation acceptable enough to grant in return that I agree it is true concerning the minor characters, though I would never admit Elizabeth Bennet, and Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey to be any less delightful than her later heroines.

What Jane Austen failed to see in that art gallery, what interested her most, what she hoped to find, illustrates her perfectly, and explains why her novels are a source of continual delight to readers whose chief interest in a book is in characterization rather than adventure. Miss Austen's chief pleasure was in human relationships. Her deep love for individuals is the philosophy "not expressed but plainly

¹Logan P. Smith, "On Re-reading Jane Austen," The New Statesman, Vol. XX (February 16, 1924), p. 543.

inspiring her work."¹ Elizabeth Bennet was a very real person to her, and becomes equally so to us. We can enter into her feeling that the last page of Pride and Prejudice was not the last for Elizabeth, for she enjoyed carrying on the lives of the people in her stories beyond the story itself, frequently commenting on what they did after her book was finished. They lived happily ever after, I am sure, in spite of an occasional blunder, for they did have faults, and their faults are integral to their natures.² Jane Austen was a realist, not an idealist.

This realism which does not spare even her heroines is neither harsh nor cynical. Jane Austen wrote with a twinkle in her eye, for as she said, she must be able to laugh at herself and others.³ "By the mere tone of her voice, she sets drab reality dancing and sparkling with the sunlight of her comic vision."⁴ Our chief delight in her characters is the secret we share with Jane Austen about them. Although we see everything that happens through the eyes of the heroines themselves, ". . . they never see the situation as it really is and as she sees it. This is the deeper source of our unbroken

¹R. Brimley Johnson, A New Study of Jane Austen (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924), p. 54.

²Lord David Cecil, Jane Austen (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1936), p. 29.

³Austen-Leigh, op. cit., p. 320.

⁴Goldwin Smith, Life of Jane Austen (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 18.

of our unbroken pleasure in reading her. We constantly share her point of view, and are aware of the amusing difference between the fact that its appearance to the actors."¹

This love of humanity, viewing it impartially with a smile even at its follies, reflects Jane Austen's own delightful personality. "I can indeed bear witness that there is scarcely a charm in her most delightful characters that was not a true reflection of her own sweet temper and loving heart," her nephew wrote.² To be sure, there are some minor characters which she "pilloried without mercy". As to these, all her biographers are emphatic in saying that she did not look critically about at her acquaintances in order to present them unflatteringly in her books. Only Lady Susan was drawn from life, and her story was taken from an old family memorandum. Her one or two possible real-life characters are portraits of those she loved. We are told repeatedly that she was one of the most considerate and least censorious of mortals. That we are told this repeatedly is due, I think, to some rather caustic remarks she has made in her letters about certain acquaintances. We must remember, however, that those comments were made to her sister Cassandra, who alone shared her most intimate thoughts.

¹Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, ed. by K. M. Metcalfe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), Intro.

²J. E. Austen-Leigh, A Memoir of Jane Austen (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1906), p. 2.

Surely nothing is more characteristic of Jane Austen than her always making the best of things. Even when she went to a party where the people were "vulgar" and "noisy", she wrote, "I had a very pleasant evening,

however though you will probably find out there was no reason for it; but I do not think it worth while to wait for enjoyment, until there is some real opportunity for it.¹

Her own contentment is reflected in Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Moreland, girls with so much enthusiasm for life that little was required to make them happy. Said Elizabeth to Darcy, "You must learn some of my philosophy. - Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure."²

Like everyone else who has enjoyed Pride and Prejudice, I have been mentioning Elizabeth Bennet. This is not to say that she was the pattern for an Austen heroine, for all of them are different. They are all alike in their wholsomeness and sincerity, and their great charm in different and varying degree. The earlier heroines have more intelligence and feeling than judgment, but what some of them lack in common sense they will learn, for their faults are only those resulting from a youthful inability to face facts, a lack of self-knowledge, over self-confidence,

¹Austen, Northanger, Introd., XV.

²Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 346.

and a little human vanity. Far from conforming to the pattern of heroines of romance of their day, they are intricately conceived, more so than those of any novelist before George Eliot.¹ Unlike the heroines of Fanny Burney, Richardson, and Fielding, who bear the stamp of the eighteenth century, these are modern girls, universal types as appealing today as they were in their author's own time.²

Impulsive Marianne Dashwood is the earliest Jane Austen heroine, for although Sense and Sensibility was finished after Pride and Prejudice, it grew out of the earlier sketch, "Elinor and Marianne", and in conception and composition is more closely linked to her earlier burlesque writing. She and Catherine Morland represent a transition stage in their author's work.³ In Marianne's extreme sensibility, or sentimentality, and in Catherine's highly romantic illusions there are traces of "Love and Friendship", one of her early burlesque sketches on the novel heroines of the period.

Marianne is a charming and lovable girl, and when. . . she was called a beautiful girl, truth was less violently outraged than usually happens. Her skin was very brown, but from its transparency, her complexion was uncommonly brilliant; her features were all good; her smile was sweet and attractive;

¹Cecil, op. cit., p. 27.

²Johnson, A New Study, p. 102.

³A. B. Shepperson, The Novel in Motley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 137.

and in her eyes, which were very dark, there was a life, a spirit, and an eagerness, which could hardly be seen without delight¹

This is one of the most complete, and one of the few descriptions of an Austen heroine. Almost to her time personal appearance was left to the imagination.²

Not only is Marianne lovely to look at, she has a warm heart, and countless enthusiasms she delights in talking about with neither shyness or reserve.

Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting; she was everything but prudent.³

Marianne at seventeen has a great deal to learn about the importance of common sense and self-control. At present "the business of self-command she settled very easily; - with strong affections it was impossible, with calm ones it could have no merit."⁴ In saving her from the hard jolts she will get in learning to face facts, her mother, whom she strongly resembled, is of no help. When they must leave their old home after Mr. Dashwood's death, Marianne and her mother "encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. . . . their

¹Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs & Co.) I, p. 63.

²W. D. Howells, Heroines of Fiction (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901) p. 57.

³Austen, Sense and Sensibility, I, p. 6.

⁴Ibid., I, p. 142.

grief was voluntarily renewed, sought for, created again and again." Though both were resolved upon never being consoled, they found life very pleasant in Barton, and in the happy events there, they were as blind in their happiness as they had been in their sorrow. Mrs. Dashwood's eldest daughter, the sensible Elinor, saw with concern that ". . . what Marianne and her mother conjectured one moment, they believed the next- that with them to wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect."¹

Elinor must be the counsellor of her mother and a steadying influence upon Marianne. With her good sense, sympathy, and "strength of understanding" she was well-suited to the role. One critic sees in Elinor the influence of Jane Austen's older and much-loved sister, Cassandra,² who was of a "colder and calmer disposition", "less demonstrative and less sunny". Elinor had

an excellent heart; her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them; it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.³

Elinor and Marianne, representing the sense and sensibility of the title, self-control and lack of it, are

¹Ibid., I, p. 26.

²Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 13.

³Austen, Sense and Sensibility, I, p. 6.

interesting as symbols in a rather mechanical plot, but are less convincing than her other heroines. Marianne's effusions and thoughtless rudeness as she dramatizes herself are often exasperating, while Elinor's perfections too pointedly parallel her sister's shortcomings.

To illustrate their contrasting behavior, both must bear the same trial, disappointment in love. Elinor accepts hers calmly, sensibly allows herself to have doubts about the young man she loves, and patiently awaits the outcome without losing her head. In so doing, she is placed in too many trying situations, I think, to be entirely convincing. We would sympathize more with Elinor, I believe had the character of Edward Ferrars, the man she loved, been better handled, for he is so weak and indecisive, one often wonders why she bothered with him. Her gentle tolerance toward the man who jilted Marianne to marry for her money a woman he despised was an error in her supposedly infallible judgment. She decided that "the world" had been responsible for the extravagance and vanity which had eventually led to his being heartless and selfish. He owed his caddish behavior to his own nature, not "the world".

While her romance was based on mutual interests, similarity of viewpoint, and a pleasant acquaintance of some length, Marianne alone of all Austen heroines, fell in love with the handsome and charming Willoughby at first sight. As one would expect of her, she falls head over heels,

"Everything he did was right. Everything he said was clever."¹ She wore her heart on her sleeve, and did not mind being laughed at. When Willoughby jilted her, she made no attempt to try to conceal her misery or to control her emotions for the sake of her family. She played over all his favorite songs, read over every line of music he had written for her, nursing her grief, which she "was in all probability not merely giving way to as a relief, but feeding and encouraging as a duty."²

Remember that Marianne is only seventeen, and she has much to learn, which she will learn before she can qualify as a true Austen heroine by the time the story ends.

Catherine Morland, who is also seventeen when the plot unfolds in Northanger Abbey, is like Marianne, open-hearted, eager, sincere, and frank to the point of bluntness. She has an innocence, a naivete, entirely her own, placing complete trust in her friends, never questioning their motives, often pathetically gullible; yet she is so sweet, so modest, so simple and straightforward, that she is as lovable and as real a character to me as any Jane Austen ever created. The very fact that she lacks the poise so characteristic of Austen heroines, increases her individuality and her appeal to readers.

Since her story is a satire on the terror-romances of Mrs. Radcliffe's school and on the sentimental novel of

¹Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, I, p. 173.

²*Ibid.*, I, p. 105.

the day,¹ it is linked, as is Sense and Sensibility to the author's earlier burlesques. In fact, the style of the opening paragraph of one of these earlier sketches is strikingly like Northanger Abbey. If Miss Austen failed here in her original purpose of pure satire², we cannot be sorry in having the character of Catherine as a result of that failure. She is all the more striking to be so real in spite of the fact that the book was primarily a satire on novel-writing. I can excuse one of Catherine's many critics for her amendment,

Perhaps Northanger Abbey may be described as the book which real Austenites appreciate most, but which the casual reader does not admire³.

It seems to me that even the "casual reader" will think Catherine the most delightful of silly little seventeen-year-olds! How can this same critic find fault with a beginning like this:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation if life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. . . . She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features; - so much for her person; - and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind. She was fond of all boy's plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy,

¹Smith, op. cit., p. 103. Johnson (A New Study, p. 187) suggests the book was also influenced by Mrs. Charlotte Lennox's The Female Don Quixote.

²G. E. Mitton, Jane Austen and Her times (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 189. ³Ibid., p. 189.

nursing a doormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush. Indeed she had no taste for a garden; and if she gathered flowers at all, it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief - at least so it was conjectured from her always preferring those which she was forbidden to take. - Such were her propensities - her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. Her mother was three months in teaching her only to repeat the "Beggar's Petition"; and after all, her next sister, Sally, could say it better than she did. . . . Her mother wished her to learn music; and Catherine was sure she should like it, for she was very fond of tinkling the keys of the old forlorn spinnet; so at eight years old she began. She learnt a year, and could not bear it; - and Mrs. Morland, who did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste, allowed her to leave off. The day that dismissed the music-master was one of the happiest of Catherine's life. . . . What a strange, unaccountable character! - for with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper; was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny; she was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as the rolling down the green slope at the back of the house.¹

This is one of only three sketches in which the author explains a heroine's background before she is a young lady. At fifteen Catherine began to qualify as a heroine, to curl her hair, to long for balls, and to love pretty clothes. At seventeen she was pretty, and had "no conceit or affectation of any kind", but "her mind (was) about as

¹Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 13-14.

ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is."¹ As for her chances for romance,

There was not one lord in the neighborhood; no - not even a baronet. . . . Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children.

But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perversity of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way.²

When she leaves on a visit to Bath with family friends, Mrs. Moreland, one of the few sensible mothers in an Austen novel, unsuspecting of the supposed danger of lords and barons, merely advises her to wrap up warm and keep accounts. At Bath she meets and is smitten by the handsome and gentlemanly Henry Tilney, a witty young clergyman. It is he who speaks for Jane Austen as he teases her about her romantic ideas gained from novel-reading. After a brief acquaintance she is invited by Henry's father, the imposing General Tilney, to visit their home, Northanger Abbey.

Her "passion for ancient edifices being next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney,"³ "with spirits elated to rapture", she hurried home to write for her parents' consent. Their permission, although she had expected it, "completed her conviction of being favored beyond every other

¹Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 18.

²Ibid., p. 16-17. ³Ibid., p. 146.

human creature, in friends and fortune, circumstance and chance."¹

Hoping, and more than half expecting Northanger Abbey to be like a castle out of The Mysteries of Udolpho, she is disappointed to find it modernized to the last degree and comfortably furnished in modern style. Her expectations are partly fulfilled by the discovery of a large old cedar chest in her cheerful room, but her embarrassment is painful when she is caught in the act of opening it by Henry's sister. Though it contained only a white cotton counterpane, her romantic imagination is again aroused when she notices a curious old black cabinet after she retires for the night. Of course Henry had only been joking about the terrible secrets to be unearthed in an old abbey, and of course she does not expect to find anything significant in it!

As the wind blows the curtains, she at last feels she is in a truly romantic situation in an old abbey on a stormy night. She "stepped boldly forward, carelessly humming a tune" and "peeped courageously behind each curtain". The chest must be investigated. However,

She should take her time; she should not hurry herself, she did not care if she were the last person up in the house. But she would not make up her fire; that would seem cowardly, as if she wished for the protection of light after she were in bed.²

¹Ibid., p. 140. ²Ibid., pp. 167-8.

In trembling suspense she opens all the drawers, but all are empty. Of course she had read all about the art of concealing treasures, and there was the possibility of secret linings in the middle section still unexplored. When she discovers a manuscript concealed far in the back, her excitement has no bounds. At this moment she accidentally extinguishes her candle, and standing in horror in the darkness, hears receding footsteps and the sound of a door closing. The lock of her own door rattled as if somebody were trying to enter, and the sound of distant moans chilled her blood.

When she eagerly opens the mysterious manuscript the following morning, she finds it to be a linen inventory and washing bills!

Though Catherine was properly humbled, once more her romantic illusions run away with her. Because General Tilney is an exacting tyrant toward his own family, because his wife had died suddenly twelve years before when Henry's sister was away from home, because the general did not like his wife's favorite walk, Catherine reasons: " - Could he therefore have loved her?" Her picture was not in his room: "He must have been dreadfully cruel to her." In showing Catherine over the house, he had gone by several doors which he had not opened for her inspection. They must be secret chambers. He took early morning strolls, and stayed up late at night:

Something was to be done which could be done only while the household slept; and the pro-

bability that Mrs. Tilney yet lived, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food was the conclusion which necessarily followed. . . . Catherine sometimes started at the boldness of her own surmises and sometimes hoped or feared that she had gone too far; but they were supported by such appearances as made their dismissal impossible.¹

She seizes the first opportunity to explore the secret chamber and finds it to be a sunny, comfortably furnished bedroom. Meeting Henry on the stairs, she feels so guilty at being discovered there, she loses all presence of mind and exclaims, "Good God, how came you here?" When Henry questions her kindly, she blurts out her fears. When she learns how ill-founded they had been, she rushes to her room in tears of humiliation, certain that she has lost Henry's friendship forever.

Although she had been able to imagine General Tilney keeping his wife a prisoner, it had never occurred to her to question his motive in inviting her on such brief acquaintance to Northanger Abbey. When he discovered he had been misled into thinking her an heiress to a great fortune, who would be a desirable match for his son, he rudely forces her to leave.

Although Catherine arrived home a sadder and wiser girl, who had learned that real life is not like that of a

¹Ibid., p. 187.

romantic novel, she had not quite graduated to perfection. Of course she could think of nothing but Henry, though her mother had no idea why she was so absent minded. Mrs. Morland urged her not to worry about trifles, and found it necessary to suggest:

. . . . I hope, my Catherine, you are not getting out of humour with home because it is not so grand as Northanger. . . . I did not quite like, at breakfast, to hear you talk so much about the French bread at Northanger.¹

In spite of her blunders, Catherine prevails in her innocence and sweetness, and in spite of her romantic folly she has so much good heart that it serves her in place of good sense.²

In the story of Elizabeth Bennet Jane Austen left burlesque writing behind her except for the minor characters to create "the heroine so many authors have tried to draw".³ Elizabeth was her "own darling child":

I must confess I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least I do not know.⁴

Elizabeth is the cleverest, the gayest, the most vivacious of Austen heroines. She takes a keen delight in people and loves a laugh, but as she said,

I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsisten-

¹Ibid., p. 241. ²Howells, op. cit., p. 58.

³Mitton, op. cit., p. 178.

⁴Austen-Leigh, Life and Letters, p. 261.

cies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them
whenever I can-¹

She can laugh at herself, too, and is highly diverted in telling her friends about Darcy's refusal to dance with her when she was without a partner at the Netherfield ball-hard as that is to believe!

Her optimism is another of her most endearing qualities, and her good nature was often put to the test. She is the second daughter of a very foolish mother, and of a father who evaded family responsibility by retreating to his study. She has two younger sisters whose bold flirtations and conspicuously bad manners continually placed their two charming older sisters in embarrassing situations, and a third sister whose pedantry and conceit was often the object of ridicule. In trying to correct them, Elizabeth was too sensible to suppose her silly mother would accept a suggestion. Though she was always courteous to her mother, and considerate of her, she did not confide in her. Nor did she make excuses for her. When she urged her father to prevent a visit of the ungovernable Lydia to the home of a doubtful older woman friend, he washed his hands of the matter.

It was not her nature, however, to increase her vexations by dwelling on them. She was confident of having performed her duty, and to fret over unavoidable evils or augment them by anxiety, was not part of her disposition.²

¹Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 53.

²Ibid., p. 217.

Her poise and self-confidence never fail her, and she is always independent in her thinking, regardless of who questions it:

'Upon my word,' said her Ladyship, 'you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person. Pray what is your age?'

'With three younger sisters grown up,' replied Elizabeth, smiling, 'your Ladyship can hardly expect me to own it.'¹

She is equally independent when she receives fair advice. When her sensible aunt cautioned her against falling in love with the handsome but unreliable Wickam, she respects the suggestion, but does not commit herself to a promise.

Elizabeth is decided in her opinions, but she faces facts in contrast to her beautiful sister Jane's characteristic of always seeing only the good in everyone, making it still better, and always hoping the best will eventually grow out of a present bad situation. Elizabeth, with "more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper", respects Jane's goodness even though she herself often sees things in an entirely different light. When Jane, engaged to Bingley, wishes her sister might be as happy as she, Elizabeth tells her she could never be as happy; "Til I have your disposition, your goodness, I never can have your happiness."²

¹Ibid., p. 157.

²Ibid., p. 327.

She is not, however, tolerant of everyone. Her prejudice against the handsome Darcy, a proud young man of wealth and position, explains the title. She is too cock-sure in forming a hasty opinion of him on first meeting, because her vanity was offended. She admits herself determined to hate Darcy, and welcomes a false evaluation of him by the dishonorable Wickam to bolster her first impressions. As she explains later,

And yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit, to have a dislike of that kind. One may be continually abusive without saying anything just; but one cannot always be laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty.¹

Elizabeth has been accused of being too pert, too sarcastic.² Sometimes, I think she was. She smiles "archly" a little too often at Darcy. On one occasion when he came over to the pianoforte with the sincere desire to hear her play and perhaps to exchange a few words with her, she is downright silly:

You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.³

¹Ibid., p. 210.

²Howells, op. cit., p. 43; Villard, op. cit., p. 62.

³Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 104.

Her usually keen sense of what was in good taste failed her again when Wickam condemned Darcy in their first conversation. I have no quarrel with her for believing his story, for people who are themselves honorable are not suspicious of duplicity in others. Her mistake lay in not immediately recognizing the bad taste of a comparative stranger in condemning another to a casual acquaintance.

When this same young man transferred his attentions to another, Elizabeth was not resentful, and maintained he would always be her model of a charming young man. A little later, though, she becomes flippant, remarking that stupid men were the only ones worth knowing, after all. Her aunt warns her that her speech "savours of disappointment."

In spite of a few little mistakes in judgment, Elizabeth Bennet remains "one of the most admirable and attractive girls in fiction".¹ Like all the heroines of the earlier novels except Elinor, Elizabeth, in her over self-confidence and lack of self-knowledge, has something to learn. We will see that she does eventually qualify in every particular to Jane Austen's standards of what a heroine should be.

¹Howells, op. cit., p. 48.

CHAPTER II

THE CHAWTON HEROINES

Jane Austen's two periods of authorship were divided by seven or eight years in which she produced no novels. The earlier ones had been written at Steventon, Northanger Abbey, the last of these being finished in 1803. No encouragement was to be given to the author by their publication, however, for Northanger Abbey found no publisher until 1818, after her death. Sense and Sensibility did not appear until 1811, Pride and Prejudice not until 1813. During the years when the Austens lived in Bath (1801-1806), she probably wrote the unfinished work, "The Watsons", later partly incorporated in Emma. During the years at Southampton (1806-1809) she did not make a single reference to work on a novel, so it has been assumed that she was not writing. One possible explanation for this appears in her letters: "Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton and doses of rhubarb."¹

We know that the period at Bath was not a happy one, for she wrote two years later that they had left Bath with

¹Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others, ed. by R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), II, p. 466.

"happy feelings of escape!" The family would have been in very poor circumstances after her father's death had it not been for the help of her brothers. The insecurity of having no settled home no doubt made the future look unpromising:

Poor Mrs. Stint! It has been her lot to be always in the way; but we must be merciful, for perhaps in time we may come to be Mrs. Stints ourselves, unequal to anything, and unwelcome to everybody!¹

The later novels date from the Chawton period, (1809-1817), when the Austen ladies moved into a cottage given by Jane's brother, Edward Austen (Knight). The intervening years had brought literary disappointment, and the deaths of her father and one of her dearest friends. In about 1800 it is probable that she experienced unhappiness in the death of a young man it is believed she loved. The difficulties and sorrows of other members of her family no doubt saddened her, for the Austens were a very congenial and devoted family who always kept in close touch with one another.

The story of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park, the first novel written at Chawton, is certainly the gravest Jane Austen ever wrote. Fanny, in her shyness and self-effacing modesty, with a "temper delicate and nervous", is in striking contrast to the decisive Elizabeth, who always knew exactly what she ought to do, or thought she did.

¹Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 186.

Her author was very wise, I think, to realize that she must depart from her usual method of introducing a heroine, to explain Fanny's childhood. Only this makes her character understandable and one to arouse our sympathy. Fanny, a naturally frail, timid child, was taken from the home of her poor parents to be brought up in the home of her uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Bertram. The unaccustomed splendor of Mansfield Park overwhelmed her, and her loneliness for her mother, her beloved older brother and sisters was not lessened by any sympathy or understanding from the Bertrams. Lord Bertram was not unkind, but he made no effort to understand her and was concerned that a proper distinction be made between her and his own daughter. Lady Bertram was an indolent woman, good natured in an indifferent and negative way, with no real interest beyond her personal comforts and her lap-dog. The care of the children and general management of everything fell on Mrs. Norris, her officious sister, who in her blind partiality for Maria and Julia Bertram saw to it that Fanny never forgot her inferior position.

The treatment of Fanny's childhood is one of the finest examples of Miss Austen's realism, for she shows that Fanny's unhappiness was the result of general indifference and lack of understanding rather than willful neglect. The cruelty of her cousins was the thoughtless cruelty of children

who made reflections on her size, could not understand her shyness, and considered her stupid because she had been taught no geography or history.

The author's impartiality is revealed, also, in her making it clear that Fanny, in her shyness and extreme sensitiveness, was not by nature a child to adjust herself easily to a different atmosphere. In this connection there is a neat touch at the end of the book: Miss Austen relates that after Fanny's marriage her younger sister Susan went to take her place at Mansfield Park, and that "Her more fearless disposition and happier nerves made everything easy for her there." She had no natural timidity and was "gradually to become, perhaps, the most beloved of the two."¹

Only Mrs. Norris, one of the meanest characters in fiction, was deliberately unkind, continually showing every partiality for her cousins, accusing Fanny of ingratitude, always reminding her she must never put herself forward, but must be "lowest and last." Poor little Fanny! No wonder she was afraid of everyone, "disheartened by Lady Bertram's silence, awed by Sir Thomas' grave looks, and overcome by Mrs. Norris' admonitions".² She was ashamed of herself, thinking it wicked not to be happy.

¹Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Co., reprint 1st ed.), II, p. 345.

²Ibid., I, p. 14.

No wonder that when she grew up, Fanny Price's favorite indulgence "was to be allowed to sit in silence unobserved." In her "child-like innocence and timidity" she is Jane Austen's delicate "white violet".¹ Her own thoughts were indeed her best companions, for hers were the pleasures of solitude, reading, and a deep love of nature.

Only Edmund Bertram, the second son, attempted to understand her, and appreciating her good sense and her quick intelligence, encouraged her in her love of reading, arranged for her to ride, and showed an interest in everything she did. In return, Fanny loved him deeply, though she could never hope to be more than a sister, for Edmund loved the witty and worldly Mary Crawford.

Fanny is the most tactful and thoughtful of mortals. She runs on errands for Mrs. Norris, and is such a sweet companion to Lady Bertram that she becomes indispensable. She chooses just the right phrase to soothe the injured feelings of her cousin's jealous fiancé, Mr. Rushworth; she listens with never-failing sympathy to Edmund's confidences about his admiration for Mary Crawford, deeply painful to her as they are, and even though he seeks her advice about Mary she tactfully refuses to give it. She is the most sensitive of all Austen heroines. When her uncle returns after a long absence,

¹ Leonie Villard, Jane Austen, A French Appreciation, trans. by Veronica Lucas (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924), p. 64.

she shows a sincere interest in his journey until after noticing the indifference of Maria and Julia, she stops asking him further questions:

And I longed to do it - but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like - I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense. . . .by showing a curiosity and pleasure. . . . he must wish his own daughters to feel.¹

On another occasion Mrs. Norris had planned for Fanny to walk to a dinner party, but her uncle insisted she be sent in a carriage, instead:

'Yes, sir,' was Fanny's humble answer, given with the feelings almost of a criminal towards Mrs. Norris; and not bearing to remain with her in what might seem a state of triumph, she followed her uncle out of the room.²

Fanny's unswerving principles are illustrated when her cousins rehearsed amateur theatricals during their father's absence. She stoutly refused to take part in their play, even when her refusal threatened an end to their plans. To a casual reader of the book her attitude would seem prudish in the extreme. So prominent a part does the incident take in the book, that one critic has even attempted to prove that Mansfield Park was written to protest the moral laxity of the play they rehearsed.³ Though the incident may illustrate that

¹Austen, Mansfield Park, I, p. 281. ²Ibid., I, p. 315.

³E. M. Butler, "'Mansfield Park' and Kotzebue's 'Lovers' Vows'," Modern Language Review (July, 1933) pp. 326-337.

Miss Austen had come to take moral problems more seriously, as a matter of fact, she always took moral problems seriously! A knowledge of the play itself does, however, save Fanny from appearing to be such a prig.¹ She was shocked, indeed, partly because she knew her uncle would disapprove, which to her was sufficient reason to abandon the scheme; but she was more shocked because her flighty cousin was playing the role of a girl of doubtful morality, opposite a man with whom she was openly flirting before her fiancé. These were her real reasons for not taking part. Fanny always tried to be fair-minded, and it was characteristic of her that she should question her own motives in refusing:

. . . . she had begun to be undecided as to what she ought to do; Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for - what might be so essential to a scheme in which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance had set their hearts? It would be so horrible for her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples;²

In her refusal under pressure to take part in anything she believed in bad taste, in her attempts to be fair, Fanny is almost perfect. What typical Austen irony, though, there is in her jealousy of the Mrs. Grant who did accept the part!

¹H. W. Husbands, "'Mansfield Park' and Kotzebue's 'Lover's Vows,': A Reply", Modern Language Review (April, 1934), p. 176-180.

²Austen, Mansfield Park, I, p. 218.

She alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in anything; she might go or stay; she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room without being seen or missed. She could almost think anything would be preferable to this. Mrs. Grant was of consequence: her good nature had honorable mention: her taste and her time were considered; her presence was wanted. . . .¹

Fanny was certainly not above human inconsistency. She attended the rehearsals: "She had known it would irritate and distress her; she had known it her duty to keep away. She was properly punished."²

This is the sort of thing that in her other books is so delightfully Austenish, a little private joke on a heroine who unsuspectingly gives herself away. In Fanny's case, though, it is not amusing - at least, not to me. It almost "goes over" in only one instance: Edmund has borrowed Fanny's mare so that Mary Crawford can first have a ride before Fanny. She is waiting, "patiently": "She began to think it rather hard upon the mare to have such double duty; if she were forgotten, the poor mare should be remembered."³

Fanny's character is one of the best examples of Jane Austen's subtlety in character portrayal in revealing the faults which are apt to be found along with certain virtues. Just as Elizabeth's wit sometimes became mere sarcasm, Fanny's strict principles made her intolerant of those who did not share her viewpoint. She is continually astonished

¹Ibid., II, p. 227. ²Ibid., II, p. 245. ³Ibid., p. 96.

at Mary Crawford's flippancy and shocked at her mischievous wit. Because Mary's brother, her own ardent admirer, was a flirt, and was never so happy as during rehearsals, he had a "corrupted mind"! Though his character proved in the end that her distaste was not as unfounded as it appeared at first, the author's own apparent indecision about his character throughout most of the book¹ resulted in scenes which made him appear in a flattering light, which resulted in Fanny's appearing very stiff.

My main quarrel with Fanny is Miss Austen's leaving her in so many passive situations. She is always looking on or left behind. Too frequently she is very tired and must sit on a park bench while everyone, except possibly the bewildered Mr. Rushworth, goes off and leaves her. There she sits, feeling lonely and neglected. Poor little Fanny! She could never realize how much she came to be appreciated. Even vivacious Mary Crawford and her worldly brother did her greater justice than she, perhaps, did them. "I fancy", said Mary, "Miss Price has been more used to deserve praise than to hear it."² For myself, I can not get her off that bench.

But her story ends as delightfully as an Austen story should, and does. It is the same Jane Austen still who writes:

¹A. R. Turpin, "Jane Austen: Limitations or Defects?", English Review, 64 (January, 1937), p. 64.

²Austen, Mansfield Park, I, p. 160.

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly at fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.¹

At thirty-three Miss Austen must have recaptured her contentment, for she could say,

I was in the same room in which we danced fifteen years ago. I thought it all over, and in spite of the shame of being so much older, felt with thankfulness that I was quite as happy now as then.²

We have every reason to believe her life at Chawton was still happier, for she had resumed her writing, and had the satisfaction of learning her published novels were favorably received. Her brother James was now rector at nearby Steventon, Edward was often there at the "Great House", which was now his, or lent it to one of his naval brothers, and her favorite brother Henry was not far away in London. Here, with her mother and her sister Cassandra, joined for several years by her friend, Mary Lloyd, she spent the last eight years of her life.

Her next Chawton heroine, Emma, is the most "Austenish" of all and the most complex. She has all of Elizabeth's vitality and self-confidence, and Catherine's straightforward sincerity; she is as exasperating as Marianne ever was at her

¹Ibid., II, p. 327.

²Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 222. Written from Southampton, December 9, 1808.

worst, but in a very different way; her good intentions equal Elinor's and surpass them; she even has Fanny's goodness of heart. This is not to say that she is a composite picture of all the rest, for she is nobody in the world but Emma Woodhouse, an exceedingly nice girl who needs to be told a thing or two. For this reason, Jane Austen thought nobody but herself would like her very much, and as she herself was not given to lecturing her young ladies on the side, she appointed Mr. Knightley, a close friend of the Woodhouse family, to do it for her.

Mr. Knightley helps to explain how Emma, who is a very clever and very capable girl, came to think that she was a great deal cleverer than she is: "At ten years old she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen."¹ Emma was always "quick and assured", while her only sister was rather backward and a trifle dull. Their mother had died too long before to be more than barely recollected, and when Isabella married, Emma at twelve became mistress of her father's house. To her indulgent parent she had no faults, and she had always been the favorite of her governess, who permitted her to do as she liked.

The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself:

¹Jane Austen, Emma (Philadelphia: Macru Smith Co., reprint 1st ed., 1816), I, p. 48.

these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments.¹

Emma's thinking that she had many enjoyments was typical of her happy disposition at twenty-one. In the little village of Highbury her wealth and position made her the young lady of first importance there. Of course nobody felt this importance more than she, but as there were no other families among whom she had friends even of her own age, to say nothing of equal position and talents, life would have been rather dull to anyone but a girl whose ingenuity and enthusiasm created interesting situations.

She managed her life very well, indeed. She was a hospitable and charming hostess to their small circle of older, and on the whole, uninteresting guests, and far from complaining about the monotony of her life, she thought herself the luckiest girl in the world. Had she not been as fine a girl as she was, she would often have been impatient with her father, for although he was a genial and kindly old man, he was a very trying one to live with, unwilling to let her out of his sight, obsessed with fears for his health and hers, and every body's, his conversation limited to the dangers of colds and of unwise diets. His interests, such as they were, Emma always put before her own. She was tolerant of his

¹Ibid., I, p. 2.

peculiarities and catered to all his whims, always with the greatest good humor.

All this kept Emma very busy. Nobody liked being busy better than she! She wanted to do everything! She did very well in drawing and music, with very little effort. She was very sorry not to make more progress, but she could never get her nieces and nephews to sit for her, and then, too, when her sister did not appreciate the portrait she had done of her husband, naturally she was angry! She wanted very much to read more, too, but as Mr. Knightley explained:

Emma has been meaning to read ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up, at various times, of books that she meant to read regularly through - and very good lists they were, very well chosen, and very neatly arranged - sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen - I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time, and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding.¹

Remember that Mr. Knightley, who is thirty-seven or eight, appreciates Emma quite as much as anybody, and notices that she is a very beautiful girl, also that she is entirely unconscious of her beauty; but he understands her also, and sees that she does have vanity of a different sort.

¹Ibid., I, p. 47.

Being able to manage her own life so well, she is a very officious little busy-body who thinks she can manage everyone else's. This she soon has an opportunity to prove when she meets Harriet Smith. Harriet is seventeen, sweet, simple, and not overly intelligent, a former student, now a parlor-boarder at Miss Goddard's school for girls. They become close friends, and are together daily, sharing intimate secrets.

This friendship Mr. Knightley does not approve. He wishes that Emma had chosen an intimacy with Miss Jane Fairfax, now visiting her aunt, for Jane is Emma's equal in "elegance", intelligence and refinement, and her superior in talent. No one placed so high a value on "elegance" as Emma did, but she considers Jane cold and indifferent, and is sorry to have to be polite to her - "to be always doing more than she wished, and less than she ought".¹ Mr. Knightley says that Emma is jealous of Jane's accomplishments. At any rate, she is offended at Jane's reserve, is unkind to her, and even suspicious of her character, while she is devoted to Harriet. Harriet in return adores Emma, whom she must always address as Miss Woodhouse, due to the inequality in their social positions. She believes exactly what her friend tells her to believe. As Mr. Knightley puts it:

¹Ibid., I, p. 231.

She (Harriet) knows nothing herself and looks upon Emma as knowing everything. She is a flatterer in all her ways, and so much the worse, because undesigned. Her ignorance is hourly flattery. How can Emma imagine she is to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?¹

Life is very, very simple to Emma. She thinks she can foretell and arrange the future for Harriet very satisfactorily. Since she had engineered, she thought, the happy marriage of her former governess, Mrs. Weston, why not marry off Harriet to a man of the social position she thinks Harriet deserves? Though she did enjoy wrapping Harriet around her finger, Mr. Knightley was not entirely fair. Emma was sincerely fond of Harriet, admiring her for the same qualities that Elizabeth appreciated in her sister Jane. Elizabeth, Emma, and Anne Elliot respected those qualities which Jane Austen always valued so highly, "tenderness of heart", "warmth", and an affectionate, open manner. Though Emma finally had to recognize Harriet's limitations in other respects, she comes to feel that these qualities beat "clearness of head", qualities which made her father loved and her sister popular. "I have it not; but I know how to prize and respect it."²

There was, unfortunately, still another aspect to Emma's friendship for Harriet. In regard to social position Emma was a snob, though this was a quality hardly recognized.

¹Ibid., I, p. 50. ²Ibid., II, p. 42.

in Miss Austen's day, and not discussed as such.¹ Emma, of all Austen heroines, was the most concerned with social distinctions, and as Harriet's position was inferior - she was the illegitimate daughter of an unknown man who provided for her - it was necessary for Emma to idealize her position by assuming she must at least be the daughter of a nobleman! She must see to it that Harriet is separated from Robert Martin, a young farmer, prosperous, respected, and likable, whom she expected to marry, but whom Emma could not recognize socially. When Harriet asks her whether she has not noticed the young man who is so devoted to her, Emma explains:

A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to rouse my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore, in one sense, as much above my notice, as in every other he is below it.²

Harriet is to be made to realize that she must be very careful about her associates. Though she had just spent a very happy six weeks visiting with his family, with whom she had everything in common, Emma will permit her to return only the briefest formal call. The most unattractive

¹Villard, op. cit., p. 211; Howells, op. cit., p. 49.

²Ibid., I, p. 36.

picture of Emma is the one in which she drives up to the Martin's to meet Harriet, shortening her call to fourteen minutes.

Her snobishness is apparent in many instances. Of Frank Churchill, with whom Emma imagines briefly she is in love, she fears "his indifference to a confusion of rank bordered too much on ineliance of mind".¹ When the Coles, a kindly and very nice couple who had made their fortune in trade, invited her to a dinner party, she thought,

The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them.²

Emma went, however! After all, she had no moral support from her dear friends, the Westons, or from Mr. Knightley. She was distressed, too, at Mr. Knightley's lack of pride in coming on foot instead of in his carriage! Let us assume, then, that since Mr. Knightley did approve of the Coles, and did go on foot to their party, Emma's ideas did not exactly coincide with Miss Austen's.

Jane Austen delighted in Emma's inconsistencies. Perhaps that is why she wrote her niece after she had finished her last novel, Persuasion, "You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me."³ For tender, wise Anne

¹Ibid., I, p. 278. ²Ibid., I, p. 292.

³Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 336.

Elliot, at twenty-eight, had "manners as consciously right as they were invariably gentle".¹ Anne and Fanny are the young women whom their author's critics have in mind when they speak of the greater depths of tenderness and feeling Jane Austen revealed in her maturity.

Anne Elliot's poignant story, in all the wistful charm of its mellow autumnal setting, might very appropriately be its author's own gracious farewell to life. Jane Austen must have felt as Lady Elliot, that

She had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children to attach her to life and to make it no small matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them.²

When this Lady Elliot died, her second daughter, Anne, was sent away to school. Anne at fourteen reminds us of Fanny, for she was a quiet and sensitive girl who was very lonely away from home. When she returned, there was no comfort for her there. She lacked the dazzling beauty of her elder proud and selfish sister, who had the exclusive interest of their vain and silly father who could admire nothing beyond title, and beauty of an obvious sort. She also lacked her younger sister's only claim to his respect, a wealthy husband. Unlike Fanny, though, Anne has

¹Jane Austen, Persuasion, ed. by Ernest Rhys (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1936), p. 131.

²Austen, Persuasion, p. 2.

become hardened to slights and bears them philosophical-ly.

Her one great mistake lay seven years behind her. Because of the advice of Lady Russel, her elderly friend, and because her marriage to Captain Wentworth might be a handicap to his naval career, she had declined to marry him. As he knew she loved him, and deeply resented her over-prudence, he had gone away, not to return. He had so distinguished himself that he had proved how ill-founded Lady Russel's doubts had been.

Too late Anne realized her mistake. She had met no one his equal, declining an offer of marriage from the man her younger sister was glad to accept. Her disappointment had left its mark: "A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early."¹ At twenty-eight she is "faded and thin". We know she loves him still, for when the Elliots are obliged to lease their stately Kellynch Hall because of Lord Elliot's extravagance, their tenants are Admiral Croft and his wife, who is Captain Wentworth's sister. Anne muses: "A few weeks more and he may be walking here."²

Though Anne suffers painful regrets, she is not embittered. She blames no one but herself for her mistake

¹Ibid., p. 3. ²Ibid., p. 20.

and envies none whose lot is happier. But when Captain Wentworth returns to visit his sister, she often has occasion to wistfully observe the contrast in her own life to that of her new friends. The happy marriage of the Admiral Crofts, who married rashly, and that of the poor, but equally happy Harvilles, intensifies the realization of her mistake. These episodes create the effect of a symphony on the theme of love.¹ So closely woven is the plot around this theme that Anne's entire character is revealed as it is affected by her love for Captain Wentworth.

Anne, however, never loses her poise. She can even smile at herself. She rises beautifully to every awkward situation, and does not lose her head even in a crisis. When Louisa Musgrove, with whom Wentworth is apparently in love, meets with a serious accident, he behaves like a distraught lover, and all the rest of the party are helpless in dismay. Louisa's sister faints, and Anne's sister has hysterics, while Anne calmly makes herself useful and directs the others.

She is never misled by vanity, as Elizabeth and Emma sometimes were. When flattered and courted by the attractive and charming William Elliot, heir to her father's estate, who is outwardly the ideal match for her, she judges him according to the standard of what she admired:

¹Cecil, op. cit., p. 22.

Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished, - but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection. Her early impressions were incurable. She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasms did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped.¹

This is the same Jane Austen who gave us Elizabeth and Emma. Here is the same admiration for "heartiness, warmth, and sincerity" in which Anne so delighted in the Musgroves. In her story is also the same faith in human nature, when Anne defends woman's constancy and pays at the same time a generous tribute to men, in spite of her disappointment.² This is the text of Miss Austen's philosophy of life:

. . . . a passionate protest against false judgments of her sex; the message, or purpose, which in time came to dominate her art.³

Here are many of the lighter touches, too, the smile at the heroine whose act reveals the mood not admitted to herself: Captain Wentworth walks by in the street. "She now felt a great inclination to go to the outer doors; she wanted to see if it rained."⁴ Not only this, but Jane Austen actually describes emotion itself as she never attempted to

¹Austen, Persuasion, p. 138. ²Ibid., p. 203.

³Ibid., X. ⁴Ibid., p. 150.

do before: "It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery"¹ "She was deep in the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness, instantly."²

While her other heroines had much of Anne's wisdom to learn, Anne, when her story began, lacked the vitality capricious Emma always had. As her story progresses, we see her late blossoming. She even acquires something of Emma's joyousness:

Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way.³

Anne saw nothing, thought nothing of the brilliancy of the room. Her happiness was from within. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks glowed, - but she knew nothing about it.⁴

Jane Austen's optimism and sense of humor had not failed her in her last illness, for six weeks before her death she wrote with her usual cheerfulness that she continued to get better:

Mr. Lyford says he will cure me, and if he fails, I shall draw up a memorial and lay it before the Dean and Chapter, and have no doubt of redress from that pious, learned, and disinterested body.⁵

¹Ibid., p. 150. ²Ibid., p. 201. ³Ibid., p. 165.

⁴Ibid., p. 159.

⁵Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 390. Written at Winchester, May 27, 1917.

Two months before she had ceased writing on the work her family called "Sanditon", in which we get a few brief glimpses of another heroine. On one occasion Charlotte Heywood is a vehicle for the satire on the heroines of romance displayed in Northanger Abbey. On another occasion, like Elizabeth, Charlotte's vanity misleads her into thinking, for a very short time, that a ridiculous young man is agreeable because of his flattering attentions:

- I make no apologies for my Heroine's vanity. - If there are young Ladies in the World at her time of Life, more dull of Fancy and more careless of pleasing, I know them not, and never wish to know them.¹

¹Jane Austen, Fragment of a Novel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 85.

CHAPTER III

THE VALUE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

As a realist, Miss Austen granted her heroines their mistakes; as a moralist, she saw to it they repented them. Good intentions must be directed by reason and acted upon. Lofty emotions in themselves merely appeared ridiculous to this practical-minded humorist.¹ From her point of view it was not enough to be good. You must also be sensible and well-mannered. Foolish and vulgar people have never been made to appear more so than by the pen of fastidious Jane Austen. As a satirist whose chief aim was to entertain, she spent no time pointing morals on the side, and less time making excuses even for her favorite Elizabeth when that young lady failed to meet her exacting standards. This impartiality was recognized by the critic who said:

If I were in doubt as to the wisdom of one of my actions I should not consult Flaubert or Dostoevsky. The opinion of Balzac or Dickens would carry little weight with me: were Stendhal to rebuke me, it would only convince me I had done right even in the judgment of Tolstoy I should not put complete confidence. But I should be seriously upset, I should worry for weeks and weeks, if I incurred the disapproval of Jane Austen.²

¹Cecil, op. cit., pp. 37, 42; Johnson, A New Study, p. 169.

²Ibid., p. 42.

The disapproval she frequently felt of her heroines was not expressed directly. Though she occasionally had a Mr. Knightly or Henry Tilney to speak for her, she knew they were wasting their breath. She knew that young girls with a great deal of self-confidence and a disinclination to face facts will have to discover their blunders for themselves, after some rather painful jolts. When they learn self-knowledge, and find that life is not as they romantically fancied it, they become better and wiser, and in the end, happier. Since they are really intelligent and good-hearted girls, when put to the final test, they have learned how to meet it.

Sentimental, romantic Marianne had a false view of life and no self-control, indulging in her emotions to the discomfort of everyone about her. Even her sincerity and frankness was carried to the extreme of rudeness. When Lady Middleton suggested casino, Marianne, "with her usual inattention to the forms of general civility",¹ and preoccupied with her own concerns, reminds her hostess that she knows she detests cards. She always left to Elinor the duty of telling white lies when politeness required them.

Though she was not engaged to Willoughby, she assumed, not without reason, he felt exactly as she did. When he

¹Austen, Sense and Sensibility, I, p. 194.

cruelly deserted her, she still refused to doubt him, determined to believe all the world had used her badly, but not Willoughby. She indulged in the misery of his absence, and made no effort to conceal it. When she learned of his marriage she became seriously ill. In her romantic flights of fancy, and in her blind infatuation for him, Colonel Brandon noticed her similarity to Eliza, a young girl he had loved, who had wrecked her life because she had let her emotions run away with her. Perhaps the comparison he makes between them is Miss Austen's method of suggesting the possibility of a similar fate for Marianne had she not learned the value of self-control in time.

It is not until she finds out that Elinor, who had been patiently caring for her and trying to comfort her, had herself been equally unhappy for months in knowing Edward Ferrars, whom she loved, was secretly engaged to another, that Marianne begins to realize her selfishness. She feels immediately that she had been unfair to Elinor in thinking her unfeeling, deeply repents her ingratitude, and swears she will hate herself forever. This change in Marianne's character happens more suddenly than it does in any of the later heroines, and is for this reason less convincing. She explains after her recovery that her illness had made her think. Though she said little, she tried to be cheerful, and her plans for reforming herself were characteristically

Marianne: she would study seriously, reading six hours a day. She was determined to no longer neglect her duties or to indulge her failings, for she felt she had injured everyone. She still could not overcome Willoughby's remembrance, but resolved to check it by religion and by reason.

Elizabeth Bennet is no romanticist, but a very practical-minded young lady who does face facts, or what she believes are facts. However, her difficulty is too much confidence in her hastily-formed opinion of Darcy. Her prejudice is so understandable, we can not blame her for it except as it was influenced by Wickam. Elizabeth over-estimated Wickam and the reliability of his information concerning Darcy as much as she under-rated the latter.

This she immediately recognized when she received Darcy's letter of explanation after she had "told him off" as only Elizabeth could, when he proposed. She did not question the truth of the letter, and was immediately struck with the discrepancy in Wickam's story, wondering how it could have escaped her before. She was heartily ashamed of herself:

'How despicably have I acted!' she cried, 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities ! who have often dis- tained the generous candor of my sister, and grati- fied 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. Pleased with the preference of

one and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself.¹

When she accidentally encounters Darcy at Pemberly, embarrassment in Elizabeth, of all people, is amusing:

She wanted to talk, but there seemed an embargo on every subject. At last she recollected she had been traveling, and they talked of Matlock and Dove-dale with great perseverance. . . . yet time and her aunt moved slowly. . . .²

When Darcy asked her to meet his sister, Georgiana, she was amazed at her own discomposure, but as "Bingley was ready, Georgiana was eager, and Darcy determined to be pleased",³ her loss of a little self-confidence could not detract from her usual charm.

In the end, Elizabeth had even learned to question the timeliness of some of her witticisms: she longed to make the observation that Darcy must find Mr. Bingley's friendship "invaluable", since he could wrap Bingley around his finger, but she checked herself.

A series of escapades at Northanger were necessary to finally prove to Catherine Morland that real life is not like a mystery-romance. She sees how her imagination, over-indulged in that sort of reading, had distorted the most

¹Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 194-5.

²Ibid., p. 238. ³Ibid., p. 243.

commonplace circumstances:

Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming as were the works of all her imitators, it was not here perhaps that human nature, at least in the Midland counties of England, was to be looked for. . . . Among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad. Upon this conviction, she would not be surprised if even in Henry and Eleanor Tilney, some slight imperfection might hereafter appear;¹

Catherine was completely humbled, but had she lost her optimism, she would not have been Catherine. Having resolved always to judge and act sensibly in the future, "she had nothing to do but forgive herself and be happier than ever; and the lenient hand of time did much for her by the insensible gradations in the course of another day."

As her mother said, Catherine had always been a "sad little shatter-brained creature", but she did know how to meet a crisis. When General Tilney forced on his daughter the painful task of putting Catherine out of the house, she managed her departure as graciously as Elizabeth could have done, showing self-control and self-respect, and a generous consideration of Eleanor's position being an embarrassing one, also.

Emma is the most recalcitrant young lady of all, and the theme of her story has been aptly called a satire on the

¹Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 200.

²Ibid., p. 201.

"self-deceptions of vanity" or learning to "know oneself". The gradual growth in her character as experience teaches her self-knowledge is more convincingly portrayed than any of the rest. Her first scrape resulting from a self-confident attempt to manage other people's lives involved the pliable Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton, the handsome and idolized new vicar of Highbury. Having persuaded Harriet to refuse Robert Martin, she taught her to aspire to a more important match, encouraging her simple little friend to fall in love with Mr. Elton, and convincing her he loved in return. She learned to her horror that not only was Mr. Elton insulted to be coupled with a girl he thought far beneath him, but that he had actually been courting Emma herself! Emma, the social leader of Highbury! And he a comparative nobody!

Emma is shocked and outraged, but she suffers much more for Harriet, who has been deeply injured by her schemes. She knows she has only herself to blame:

It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious, - a trick of what ought to be simple.¹

She resolved never to attempt any more match-making. However, her imagination takes another romantic sally when the much admired Frank Churchill "rescued" Harriet from the

¹ Austen, Emma, I, p. 192-3.

gypsies. What a romantic, what a logical beginning for a love story! When Harriet confided that she loved a gentleman much superior even to Mr. Elton, Emma's conjecture is confirmed, but remembering her past errors, she begs Harriet not to mention the name of the gentleman who has now won her heart. She cautions Harriet not to presume too much, but adds that after all, matches of even greater disparity had taken place! Her friend assures her that she has every reason to believe her devotion is returned. Again Emma must suffer for Harriet when Frank Churchill's engagement to Jane Fairfax is revealed. Far worse than this, when she expects Harriet to be heart-broken anew, she learns that it is not Frank Churchill, but Mr. Knightley on whom Harriet has set her heart.

This is real tragedy for Emma, who suddenly realizes Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! Well may she blame herself for her self-deception, blunders, and blindness:

With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She was proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done nothing - for she had done mischief.¹

She generously defended Harriet, who would never have dared fancy herself in love with a man of Mr. Knightley's position had she herself not encouraged such ambitions. She is even

¹Ibid., II, p. 254.

more concerned on Mr. Knightley's account. She realizes there would be nothing new in a man's falling victim to a girl who sought him. What would be new in chance and circumstances determining a man's destiny?

We will leave Emma to her worries on that score, as she had them coming to her, and say in her favor that she finally cleared herself of all blame in connection with Jane Fairfax, whom she had snubbed, misjudged, and unknowingly offended by flirting with the young man to whom Jane was secretly engaged. Now that it was her turn to be snubbed, she accepted it in the best of good grace, doing everything in her power to make amends. She had also been thoughtlessly unkind to poor, well-meaning, boring Miss Bates, whom she could not resist mimicing. When she became actually rude, Mr. Knightley reprimanded her for it, and Emma repented her action in tears.

Miss Austen was indeed courageous in portraying her willful Emma in all her smugness and over-bearing self-confidence, but she succeeded in making us like her for her sincerity, her enthusiasm, her good-heartedness, and her gradual recognition of her mistakes. We never lose confidence that Emma, like her other young ladies with lessons to learn, will come out with flying colors in the end.

CHAPTER IV

THE PATTERN OF A HEROINE'S DAY.

To find Emma Woodhouse receiving her morning callers or Marianne Dashwood practising at her pianoforte, to see Anne Elliot walking along the streets of Bath, or Catherine Morland exploring the pathways of Northanger Abbey, or to look in on Elizabeth Bennet dancing at a Netherfield ball, is to catch glimpses of Jane Austen's own daily life.

In the lives of incessant though futile activity of the country gentlefolk of the eighteenth century, in the honest and upright souls strongly attached to reality and order, to peace and material prosperity, we recognize some of the essential characteristics of the English soul. . . .¹

as Jane Austen reveals it. If the picture seems incomplete, we must remember that those characteristic omissions are due, not to the narrowness of her interests, but to the limitations imposed by her literary technique.²

Miss Austen's "own commonplace daily life came first. Yet it is in the end the one fact of her biography that matters - and the truth of her books proclaims it."³ Her

¹Villard, op. cit., p. 195.

²Cecil, op. cit., p. 7-11.

³Austen, Northanger, Introd., IV.

daily round of household tasks and amusements differed from that of her heroines in only one respect, her authorship. Indeed, so far as could be observed, it differed not at all. Even Caroline Austen, one of her favorite nieces, never saw her aunt write on those little "two-and-a-half inch squares of ivory" which she slipped out of sight when callers arrived. It was a liesurely life, for servants discharged all menial household tasks - even the Dashwood ladies, whose income was smaller than that of most Austen families, had two maids and a man for their little cottage at Barton. Jane, herself, had two household duties, the preparation of breakfast at nine, and the supervision of the tea, sugar, and wine stores.

The morning was well along, though, before breakfast, for their day was divided differently from ours. Breakfast was usually at ten, as it was at Longbourn. Darcy wrote that important letter to Elizabeth before breakfast, and it was early for William Price to have had breakfast and to be ready to start to London by nine-thirty.

Those mornings in the world of Steventon, Longbourn, Hartfield, and the rest, unlike ours, had great social significance. They appear to have been mainly spent in paying and receiving calls. These were the hours when all new-comers worthy of recognition were "waited upon", and friends and acquaintances were visited for exchange of gossip and to talk over a ball of the night before. Even the odious Miss Stones,

as guests of a neighbor, must very frequently be called upon and received in return. Such a social requirement may easily have led to Miss Austen's writing to her sister: "Miss Fletcher and I were very thick, but I am the thinnest of the two."¹ Of Elinor and Marianne's call at Lady Middleton's, she wrote:

On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse. In the present case it took up ten minutes to determine whether the boy were most like his father or mother, and in what particular he resembled either; for of course everybody differed, and everybody was astonished at the opinion of the others."²

When visitors dropped in at the Austen's, Jane usually picked up her needlework. We read that her sewing was as meticulously neat as her hand-writing. Among the pieces of her needlework which have been kept, a scarf two-and-a-half yards long, worked throughout in white satin-stitch, is so faultless and delicate that its design has been used to form the border of the tablet at Chawton Cottage, commemorating her centenary.

This was a time, too, for another main business of a heroine's life, the "pursuit of accomplishments" so caustically commented upon by Darcy, who perhaps speaks for Miss Austen. She herself practised her music regularly every morning, though we hear only of her playing country dances for her nieces and nephews. Most of her heroines play, too, though

¹Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 102.

²Austen, Sense and Sensibility, I, p. 41.

Marianne was the only one unusually devoted to it. Anne

played a great deal better than either of the Miss Musgroves; but having no voice, no knowledge of the harp, and no fond parents to sit by and fancy themselves delighted, her performance was little thought of.¹

Both Elizabeth and Emma lightly comment about their lack of practise, but neither is in the least embarrassed by her limitations. Elinor was talented in drawing, but Catherine "had no notion of drawing - not even enough to attempt a sketch of her lover's profile, that she might be detected in the design. There she fell miserably short of the true heroic height."² The rest of her heroines fell short, too, of being truly accomplished. Fanny treasured her books and her plants. Emma and Harriet spent much time collecting and copying riddles. Their shopping for ribands at Fords' is surely one of the most delightful shopping expeditions in literature!

The custom of "lunch" was not yet established, but light refreshments were served to morning callers. Henry Tilney's servant brought in a tray for his guests at Woodston; Lady Catherine rudely declined to eat at Longbourn; Maria Bertram's party to Southerton were served with "abundance and elegance"; Miss Bates served baked apples and sweet-cakes; and at Pemberly there were cold meats, cake, and a large

¹Austen, Persuasion, p. 39.

²Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 16.

variety of the finest fruits. After one of those popular morning excursion parties, Mr. Knightley treated his guests to a "cold collation" accompanied by "spruce beer" and Madeira. Even when callers did not appear, there was evidently some sort of light meal between breakfast and dinner.

In the afternoon, Caroline Austen writes of her aunt at Chawton,¹ she usually "walked out", to Alton to shop, to the "Great House", to Chawton Park, and sometimes, but not often, to visit a neighbor. All her heroines, too, are great walkers, even Fanny, though she tired easily, while Catherine's mother complained that she was never in-doors. For these girls who loved the outdoors, walking and horse-back riding were the only means of following athletic pursuits, and even when walking, they must observe the rules of decorum. If they were so indiscreet as to get their skirts muddy, and to go unaccompanied for as great a distance as three miles, such behavior was regarded as shocking- but not by Jane Austen!

Dinner was at three o'clock at the earliest, though five was most fashionable.² Mrs. Jennings had dinner at five, but Mr. Woodhouse, who took endless precautions about his diet and health, saw to it that dinner was regularly at

¹Mary A. Austen-Leigh, Personal Aspects of Jane Austen (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1920), p. 143.

²Austen, Northanger, appendix, p. 6.

four o'clock at Hartfield. Miss Bingley was in the height of fashion, so at Netherfield they dined at six-thirty. Tom Musgrove did even better, for he could proudly announce he was to dine at eight!

Tea was served from six-thirty to eight. After formal dinner parties both tea and coffee appeared when the gentlemen re-joined the ladies, as at Southerton and Longbourn. Who will very soon forget the significance of Darcy himself returning his coffee-cup to where Elizabeth was pouring! When Catherine arrived at Fullerton between six and seven, her mother "hastened" tea for the "comfort of the poor traveler."

On those evenings when no special entertainment was planned for guests, we may find Elizabeth Bennet at the pianoforte, engaging in reparté with Darcy. Of a similar evening of her own, Miss Austen wrote:

To sit in idleness over a good fire in a well-proportioned room is a luxurious sensation. Sometimes we talked, and sometimes we were quite silent; I said two or three amusing things and Mr. Holder made a few infamous puns.¹

Not that all evenings provided such happy conversation! As likely as not there would be a Mr. Collins pompously discussing his duties and obligations as a clergyman, or a Miss Bates cheerfully rambling on forever about nothing! In Miss Austen's drawing-rooms there was no talk of the war, of social conditions,

¹Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 147.

or profound abstractions, and "from politics, it was an easy step to silence."¹

On such evenings, reading aloud was a popular pastime. Miss Austen herself read well, on one occasion the first canto of "Marmion", which at first she didn't care for. Henry Crawford charmed everyone with his reading of Henry VIII, but Edward Ferrars disgusted Marianne with his "impenetrable calmness" in reading her favorite Cowper, and Lydia yawned while Mr. Collins read sermons.

When a group of friends were being entertained, all the young ladies who could, and some who couldn't, played and sang. Miss Austen herself had a sweet voice and sang with feeling. Card games also were inevitably introduced. Among the most popular games of the day were brag, speculation, cribbage, whist, vingt-un, and spillikins, also casino and piquet. Miss Austen was invincible at spillikins and cup and ball. At the Phillips's there was the game of lottery tickets. Elizabeth declined to play loo at Netherfield one evening because they were playing high.

After the music and games, there might be impromptu dancing. Jane Austen's enthusiasm for dancing is revealed in her letters. In her youth there were balls at the homes of three peers near Steventon and monthly assemblies at

¹Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 111.

Basingstoke. Shortly before leaving Southampton for Chawton she attended two assemblies and crowded in all the society and amusement she could. On one occasion she danced nine out of ten dances, and on another she danced all of twenty with no fatigue. Her enthusiasm is revealed, too, in her heroines' love of dancing. All of them danced well. The balls usually began with a minuet, and to the couple who led off went the chief honor of the evening. The night Fanny was given this honor will be remembered by all readers of Mansfield Park, while to Elizabeth Eliot, the haughty eldest daughter of Sir Thomas, it came as a matter of course. It was the fashion to change partners at the end of the "two dances" made memorable by Mrs. Bennet. There were reels, cotillions, and horns, but the "ceaseless country dance" predominated.

Let those who assume that Jane Austen was not fond of children read the ballroom scene in which little Charles Blake dances with Emma Watson!¹ Indeed, to leave out the balls, would be to lose much of the flavour of Jane Austen. What could be more typical of her work than Elizabeth saying to Darcy, "I can not talk of books in a ball-room!" or Catherine Morland's disappointment in her first ball until the handsome Henry Tilney asked her to dance? So delightful are such scenes to Austen admirers that one of them, a learned

¹Austen-Leigh, Memoir, "The Watsons," p. 319.

professor, has propounded a question of the sort that others delight in trying to solve: "Who did take Emma down to that ball supper at the Crown?"¹

In Emma's own home suppers always closed Hartfield parties. How disappointed Mrs. Bennet was not to get Darcy and Bingley to stay for supper after her dinner party! Mr. Collins would drive home after supper "enumerating all the dishes". When there was no company, supper at the Austen's was a "scratch meal" at ten. She intimates that fixed suppers were not quite the thing.

To discuss this daily round of duties and amusements is to give a limited picture of Miss Austen's interests, but omissions are typical of her novels. For this reason, she has been charged, not only with indifference to social conditions, but worst of all, irreligion.²

It is true that Miss Austen did not often look beyond the lives of her own family and neighbors of Steventon, where she spent the first twenty-four years of her life. Her father was rector of that village, and also of Deane, about a mile away. The combined population of both was about three hundred. The brief periods while she was away at school with

¹E. G. Salter, "Round the Clock with Jane Austen," Cornhill Magazine, . 55. (October, 1923), p. 437.

²Johnson, A New Study, p. 54.

her sister Cassandra had ended by the time she was ten. Although she was later to live in Bath, Southampton, and Chawton, and was often to pay long visits to her relations in London and the towns of that region, her experience was limited to the class of society with her novels deal. When she urged her niece not to write about Ireland, about whose customs she would know nothing, she was expressing one of the firmest convictions of her own writing creed. It was to be only "the dear humanity which she knew and loved so well"¹ which she was to re-create in her novels.

This tranquil acceptance of class isolation was "almost odious" to Charlotte Bronte.² Others have frequently referred to Emma Woodhouse's comment on commercial backgrounds to illustrate the author's own point of view. Emma, disgusted with Mrs. Elton's vulgarity, seems to find an explanation for it: ". . . when though part of every winter she (Mrs. Elton) had been used to spend at Bath, Bristol was her home, the very heart of Bristol."³

Perhaps Emma did speak for Jane Austen. We must remember, however, that she lived at the close of an age when class distinctions were strong. It was characteristic of her, too, to accept life as she found it. Her lack of revolt,

¹See p. 78. ²Villard, op. cit., p. 197.

³Ibid., p. 198.

which has been called a "distainful indifference to the social conditions of the poor", also alienated George Elliot and Mrs. Gaskell. By 1865 the commercial towns which rose with industrialism were recognized as representing a new social order, while in Miss Austen's day they still offended the cherished prejudices of the gentry."¹

To such charges of Jane Austen's narrowness, Lord David Cecil, to name only one, has given a most satisfactory answer: that her first literary impulse being humorous, her themes must necessarily have been confined to such human relationships as were adapted to satiric implications, and that it was her strict adherence to this limitation which has made her works such masterpieces of craftsmanship.² To the accusation that she was irreligious, her own life and the high moral tone of her books is the best answer, as several have pointed out.³ Anyone accepting a third criticism, that she was not fond of children, must ignore the fact that she was a favorite with her many nieces and nephews, and avoid reading some of the finest of her letters.

¹Ibid., p. 198.

²Cecil, op. cit., p. 7-11.

³Mary Austen-Leigh and R. B. Johnson; and Rowland Grey, "The Religion of Jane Austen", The Bookman, 78 (September, 1930), p. 332-335.

Although there is little space devoted to description of scenery in her novels, they reveal enough, and her letters more, to show that she did, indeed, feel that nature must be "one of the joys of heaven." Her literary enthusiasms are mentioned in her novels and letters, and her love of reading has been thoroughly discussed, especially by such critics as R. Brimley Johnson, and Mary Lascelles.

CHAPTER V

JANE AUSTEN, AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY DOROTHY DIX

Jane Austen dealt exclusively with human relationships, and particularly with considerations of love and marriage. Her views on the subject are so practical, adaptable, and reliable that readers of Dorothy Dix will discover that Miss Austen's suggestions in choosing a husband or wife are as up-to-date, with only one exception,¹ as yesterday's newspaper! Though she herself never married, she was not the "precise, taciturn, piece of single blessedness" she was once falsely pictured as being. She enjoyed a joke when she was reminded that the rector of Chawton was a bachelor:

I am very much obliged to Mrs. Knight for such a proof of the interest she takes in me, and she may depend upon it, that I will marry Mr. Papillon, whatever may be his reluctance or my own.²

Her model of "right feminine happiness" was Mrs. John Knightley, wholly absorbed in her husband and children, for she recognized that in her age only marriage offered women

¹Engagements were as binding to a man as marriage, since he was honor-bound to keep them.

²Austen-Leighs, Life and Letters, p. 221.

the opportunity for independence and security. She observed that single women had such a propensity for being poor! Only Emma of all her heroines had no reason to dread spinsterhood:

Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous disagreeable old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else!¹

Though Jane Austen regarded marriage as the happiest destiny for her heroines, match-making and husband-hunting would not do. All of Emma's match-making met with disaster, and Mrs. Jennings's pre-occupation on the subject was even more ridiculous. Emma Watson said that husband-hunting was even worse. In fact, marrying a man she did not like merely for the sake of position was the only thing in the world she could think of that would be worse than teaching school! Elizabeth Elliot, for all her beauty, never caught a man, and the charming Mary Crawford, whose object was to marry if she could marry well, was criticised. Those who married for money, as William Elliot, Willoughby, and Maria Bertram did, had reason to regret it. Even the sensible Charlotte Lucas, who was apparently satisfied with her bargain, found

¹Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 128-9.

it convenient after her marriage to change the location of her living-room so that it overlooked the least desirable view in order to prevent her tiresome husband from being tempted away from his study.

Though Miss Austen thought the practical considerations of marriage were highly important, she considered Charlotte's attitude too realistic. Though her choice was defended by Jane Bennet, Elizabeth was bitterly disappointed in the friend she had greatly admired:

. . . . for were I persuaded Charlotte had any regard for him, I should only think worse of her understanding than I now do of her heart. . . . you shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavor to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger security for happiness.¹

A marriage purely of reason, but based upon respect and gratitude, Jane Austen did approve, as she illustrated when Marianne Dashwood accepted, "with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship", a man eighteen years her senior. In marrying Colonel Brandon, she repudiated the last of her firmest romantic convictions, that second attachments were impossible, and that a man of thirty-five was too old to marry. In the beginning, she had been

¹Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 128-9.

contemptuous of the gentleman "who still sought the constitutional safeguard of a flannel waistcoat!" Having married this same man, she eventually became as devoted to him as she had once been to Willoughby.

Though none of her heroines married for money, she thought it very foolish to marry without it. When Elinor and Edward Ferrars planned to marry, they found "they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life."¹ Even Marianne's earlier romanticism did not involve thinking that she and Willoughby could live on love alone. In fact, her ideas about the scale of living necessary to happiness were rather extravagant!

Nothing is more important than an Austen heroine making the right choice of a husband. This is the final test of her character. Though she marries for love, she must also consider the man's social position, whether his viewpoint and tastes are in sympathy with hers, and whether her admiration is based upon respect. She must also be able to judge his character intelligently and impartially for herself. There is even more to it than that. There was much to be said for a girl's being attracted to qualities that were not necessarily better, but different from her

¹Austen, Sense and Sensibility, II, p. 285.

own. Anne Elliot admired Captain Wentworth for the spirit, eagerness, and confidence she herself lacked, and Emma respected, though she did not at first agree with Mr. Knightley's ideas. Though John Dashwood loved his wife and their viewpoint and interests were the same, their similarity, though it did not endanger their happiness, did have an unhappy effect upon his character. Had his wife been more amiable, he might have been so himself, but Mrs. Dashwood was "a strong caricature of himself; more narrow-minded and selfish". As it was, he was merely respectable.

Though both Elizabeth and Emma were misled by a young man's superficial attraction, their error was only temporary. Their author made it clear that there are a great many attractive and charming young men who will make a "splash" with one's friends and be generally regarded as great catches. Her warning is implicit that one must not be blinded by external advantages, must not idealize a man because he is likable and popular. Fanny Price criticised Mary Crawford's superficial judgment:

The woman who could speak of him, and speak only of his appearance! What an unworthy attachment to be deriving support from the commendations of Mrs. Frazer! She who had known him intimately half a year! Fanny was ashamed of her.¹

There is no marriage in an Austen novel resulting from a dashing young hero looking into the eyes of a

¹Austen, Mansfield Park, II, p. 263.

beautiful heroine with the instantaneous recognition of both that they are in love! Elinor became attached to Edward Ferrars because of the "excellence of his understanding and his principles". Elizabeth was certainly not swept off her feet by Darcy! Her prejudice toward him gave way to respect and gratitude, until she finally realized that he was the man whose "disposition and talents" most suited her. Fanny's love for Edmund Bertram grew out of her gratitude for his understanding and sympathy during her unhappy childhood and her respect for his character. Emma married her brother-in-law, a man considerably older than she, who had for years been her only critic, but who understood her so well that he found her "faultless in spite of her faults". Though Catherine Morland idolized her Henry Tilney, he poked fun at her, until his admiration for her innocence and modesty became affection.

Though Miss Austen placed a higher value on common sense than on romance, Anne Elliot's love story illustrates her recognition, too, that a girl in love should not be entirely guided by practical considerations and over-prudence:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been-- how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence! - She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance

as she grew older - the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning.¹

Young girls who at present are writing to Dorothy Dix for advice on how to inveigle a man into matrimony might study the timeless techniques employed by Austen heroines. Far be it for clever Miss Austen to imply the same method works in all cases! Girls seeking a model to adopt must remember, however, that its original success was due to its being employed unconsciously by young ladies who have few equals in lack of affection, wholesomeness, sincerity, and charm.

Marianne's example is the only one they will find a little unrewarding, for I am inclined to think they will say, "I wonder how on earth she ever got him!" You see, Colonel Brandon had already had one disappointing experience in loving a girl who was as sentimental and lacking in self-control as Marianne, and why, at his age, he immediately fell in love with a girl of exactly the same type, is a little hard to explain. Furthermore, Marianne thought him stodgy, unfeeling, and uninteresting, and considered him too old for marriage. And she never even took the trouble to be polite! I can only conclude that Colonel Brandon was even more optimistic than Jane Austen herself, that he was not half as sensible as Elinor thought he was, and that

¹Austen, Persuasion, p. 24.

Marianne must have appealed to his protective instincts.

Those who have a preference for the "being-hard-to-get" method will like it all the more as it is put into effect by Elizabeth! While the handsome Miss Bingley was literally "parking on his trail" and gushing over him, Elizabeth Bennet gaily ignored him. When he condescendingly proposed to her that first time, she made it clear he was the last man on earth she would ever consider as a husband. When she finally did accept him, she was very feminine in asking him how he had ever come to fall in love with her. He need not have answered for us to know that her gaiety, wit, and independence had done the trick. Her indifference was what first attracted the worldly and sought-after Henry Crawford to Fanny Price. From the moment he said to his sister, "Her looks say, I will not like you, I am determined not to like you; and I say she shall",¹ he was a doomed man! Emma had the same gay independence characteristic of Elizabeth. As she herself put it, "Oh, I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other;"2

Unfaltering loyalty, patience, and untiring perseverance are also as effective here as elsewhere, as Elinor and Fanny proved. Add to this, propinquity in the latter's case,

¹Austen, Mansfield Park, I, p. 328.

²Austen, Emma, II, p. 344.

and Edmund Bertram, for all his temporary infatuation for Mary Crawford, was sure to turn to Fanny in the end. She was always there in the background to listen to his praise of Mary Crawford, to sympathize with all his doubts, to comfort him in his difficulties; and she topped all this with the wisdom of avoiding open criticism and refusing to give advise! Even that bench I have never been able to get her off of served its purpose in the end, for although Miss Crawford had nearly broken his heart, "after sitting under trees with Fanny all the summer evenings, he had so well talked his mind into submission, as to be very tolerably cheerful again."¹ Certainly a lot of patience was required on Fanny's part before he was in a frame of mind to propose to her, and Miss Austen's avoidance of the final love-scene is typical of her treatment of proposals and their acceptance.

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion that everyone may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary as to time in different people. I only entreat everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire.²

Elinor, too, patiently endured a great many painful situations before Edward Ferrars was free to marry her. Not

¹Austen, Mansfield Park, II, p. 330.

²Ibid., II, p. 342.

only must she listen to the enthusiastic confidences of the girl to whom he was engaged, hers was the task of informing him that all the financial obstacles to his marriage to somebody else had been overcome, and the living of Delaford being his, to wish him all the happiness in marriage this unhappy event would make possible. Yet her loyalty never faltered. She "gloried in his integrity" in refusing to break his engagement to the girl he no longer cared for. Anne Elliot was equally loyal to Captain Wentworth, even though he apparently loved Louisa Musgrove. Though she paid a generous tribute to men, she could well claim for her own sex the privilege "of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."¹

The "Oh-you-wonderful-man Theory" is delightfully represented by naive Catherine Morland, "listening with sparkling eyes to everything he said; and finding him irresistible, becoming so herself."² When Catherine lamented her lack of knowledge, she provided the perfect opening for him to inform her at length on all the topics she knew nothing about. Her shame of her ignorance was

A misplaced shame. Where people wish to attract, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always

¹Austen, Persuasion, p. 203.

²Austen, Northanger, p. 131.

wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can. . . . But Catherine did not know her own advantage - did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man,¹

. . . . I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of a heroine's dignity; but if it be new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own.²

The "old-fashioned" virtues with timeless appeal, gentleness, modesty, and sweetness, were what made Anne and Fanny so admired. In the end, Anne was loved all the more for the very qualities which had led her to refuse Captain Wentworth eight and a half years before. Fanny's sweetness appealed equally to the sophisticated Henry Crawford and to principled Edmund Bertram. As Miss Austen said, though a man may love a woman in whom that quality is absent, he can never love unless he at least believes it to be present. Fanny's goodness was equally appreciated by both. Edmund realized

She was of course only too good for him, but as nobody minds having what is too good for them, he was very steadily earnest in the pursuit of the blessing,³

¹Ibid., p. 111. ²Ibid., p. 243.

³Austen, Mansfield Park, II, p. 343.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In one respect, Jane Austen is the most impersonal of writers, for the events depicted and the characters portrayed in her novels are not autobiographical, with a few possible exceptions. Her devotion to her sister, Cassandra, may have influenced the portrait of Elinor in Sense and Sensibility; her affection for her two naval brothers and her admiration of their careers is enthusiastically reflected in her sketches of William Price, Fanny's sailor brother in Mansfield Park, and in Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, and David Harville in Persuasion.

Even her point of view is an objective one.

However, the lives of her heroines do give us an insight into her own life, for they are of her own place and time, part of a spectacle of life confined to the English country gentility of the eighteenth century. Their characters reflect her own personality and standard of values, as she views them smilingly and optimistically, with a delight that is no less apparent for being impartially realistic.

In later years, the presentation of her heroines retained the same optimism; yet it reflected a deeper

feeling and a gentler tolerance. For this reason, we have come to know, not only the charming heroines themselves, but also have come to understand and appreciate the woman who has brought them to life. We can agree that

It is her own life that Jane Austen has drawn for us in the novels. . . . very precisely re-creating with infinite wit, tenderness, and humour the dear humanity she knew and loved so well; not seeking wider fields, more adventurous drama, or more varied characters, than any ordinary country parish would provide. The pleasures, the pre-occupations, the problems of her heroines were no less Jane's own; she wrote of nothing she did not know, she experienced nothing of which she has not written; it is the perfect union between the author and her books by which her genius achieved artistic beauty and truth.¹

¹Johnson, "Introduction" to Persuasion, XII.

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