

THE TECHNIQUE OF COMEDY IN THE NOVELS
OF JANE AUSTEN

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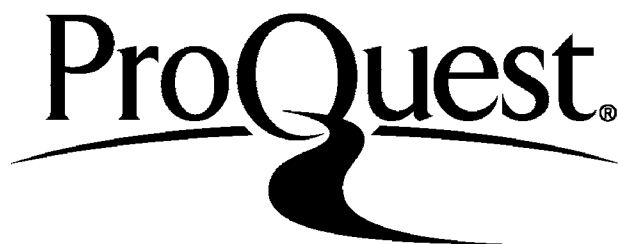
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ABSTRACT

This study of the comic technique of Jane Austen emphasises the social and moral basis of her comedy and begins with a chapter on an analysis of her values. It then proceeds to look at various aspects of her comic technique, namely, her comic characters, her comic situations and her comic voice. The second chapter distinguishes two main categories of comic characters: the 'comic fools,' usually the minor characters, unaware, undiscerning and often consistently comic, and the major comic characters, intelligent, perceptive and only comic at some points when they make mistakes of judgment and perception. The chapter concentrates on both the content and form of these characters, drawing illustrations from as many of the novels as possible. The third chapter traces the author's progress from the farcical and often unsubtle comic situations of the early works to the complex comic situations of the mature novels in which character and incident are much better co-ordinated. The chapter

on the author's comic voice discusses the various devices by which Jane Austen makes her comic presence felt in her novels, and the final chapter examines the unfinished work Sanditon, pointing out new comic tendencies and tentatively suggesting that it might have been a different kind of comic novel.

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INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to write on the comic technique of Jane Austen because I believe it is only through technique that the artist explores, develops and evaluates his subject, and I see Jane Austen as a highly conscious artist exercising a very careful technical scrutiny of her subject matter.

Contemporary reviews of Jane Austen emphasised her superiority over the sentimental novelists and praised her ability to combine amusement with moral teaching, but apart from a few general and interesting comments on the content of the novels they left little that is of any value as criticism. Walter Scott,¹ Richard Whately² and G.H. Lewes³ made more critical appraisals of Jane Austen. They noted and praised her unity of action, her vivid distinctness of description and particularly her dramatic presentation of

1. An unsigned review of Emma, Quarterly Review, xiv (March 1816), 188-201.

2. A review of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, Quarterly Review, xxiv (January, 1821), 352-376.

3. "The Novels of Jane Austen," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, lxxvi (July, 1859), 99-113.

character but they drew no conclusions about her powers as a comic artist. Scott did talk in general terms about her comic dialogue but he did not go into details. He did not recognise the comic significance of characters like Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse for he faulted Jane Austen for the emphasis given to such "characters of folly or simplicity such as those of old Woodhouse and Miss Bates ... [whose] prosing is apt to become as tiresome in fiction as in real society."¹ G.H. Lewes went as far as to compare Jane Austen to comic writers like Fielding and Molière, arguing that for all his great vigour of mind Fielding was inferior to Jane Austen in the representation of character and in real humour. He talked of the humorous way in which the inanity of Mr. Collins and the vulgarity of Mrs. Elton are exposed in Pride and Prejudice and Emma but he did not relate this aspect of the novelist's technique to her comic art in the widest sense.

The only nineteenth century piece of criticism that came near recognising the comic art of Jane Austen was Richard Simpson's² review of J. Austen-Leigh's A Memoir of Jane Austen. Simpson showed a nineteenth century obsession with character presentation and therefore considered only some aspects of her comic characterisation, but his discussion is a valuable one in determining the comic essence of

1. Scott, p.360.

2. North British Review, lii (April, 1870), 129-152.

minor characters. He saw Jane Austen's comic fools as possessing two separate qualities:

... first, a thorough weakness either of will or intellect, an emptiness or irrelevancy of thought such as to render it impossible to know what the person would think of any given subject, or how he would act under it; and often, secondly, in addition to this, fixed ideas on a few subjects, giving the whole tone to the person's thoughts, so far as he thinks at all, and constituting the grounds for the few positive judgments arrived at, even in subject-matter to which the ideas in question are scarcely related. 1

He talked interestingly about these characters and even went as far as to identify the element of farce in their presentation. He distinguished another class of comic fools as "characters who are sometimes acute enough mentally; whose meanness is in their moral understanding rather than their intellect,"² put John Dashwood and his wife in this category and analysed their famous conversation in the opening chapters of Sense and Sensibility. But he seemed in the course of his review to have lost interest in Jane Austen as a comic artist and no other nineteenth century critic followed his line of argument.

The new twentieth century interest in Jane Austen emphasises technical aspects: the form and structure of the novels, their narrative devices and their texture of

1. Simpson, p.145.

2. p.147.

dialogue.¹ Mary Lascelles' book Jane Austen and Her Art is the first serious work of this analytical kind. For the first time in Jane Austen criticism we have a detailed and illuminating discussion of the author's narrative techniques, her dialogue and her use of language. But although Mary Lascelles sees Jane Austen as a highly conscious artist she does not see her principally as a comic writer. She discusses Jane Austen's comic characters, compares and contrasts her comic fools with Shakespeare's, and defines the subject of her comedy as the area in which people make fools of themselves and others. But she argues that the source of the comedy lies beyond the scope of her book:

Must we, then, set out to find the source of comic delight in her novels? That is a problem more properly left to a philosophic critic. It is too abstract for a mere curious reader. 2

1. In his article "Technique as Discovery," Hudson Review (1948-9) Mark Schorer states a principle which I think underlies the new emphasis on technique in literary criticism: "to speak of content as such," [he argues] "is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; ... it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique."

2. Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (1939) p.139.

Since Mary Lascelles' book there have been various other studies of Jane Austen's art¹ but none have concentrated on her comedy. D.W. Harding² for instance, sees Jane Austen as a satirist who uses satire as a means not of admonition but of self-preservation. Part of her aim as a novelist, Harding argues, was to find the means for unobtrusive spiritual survival, without open conflict with the friendly people around her whose standards in simple things she could accept. She found her readers eager to laugh at faults they tolerated in themselves and others so long as these were exaggerated, and the laughter kept good-natured, and she used caricature therefore as a means of entertaining and at the same time of criticising her society. On other occasions, in Emma for instance, she deliberately put some of the traits she disliked in characters who in many ways had admirable standards. In this way she could both criticise and entertain her readers without necessarily falling out with them. Harding's essay is a subtle and valuable introduction to one aspect of Jane Austen's art.

In Irony as Defense and Discovery Marvin Mudrick sees Jane Austen primarily as a detached observer, acutely aware

1. Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Ohio, 1962). Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen (London, 1963). Howard Babb, Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue (Ohio, 1962).

2. "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," Scrutiny, viii (1940), 340-362.

of incongruities in her society and using irony as a means of sharpening and exposing them. Jane Austen's irony, Mudrick argues, is at its most comic when it explores incongruities and provokes laughter. It degenerates into mere convention when instead of interpreting convention, the author, perhaps reacting to social pressures, becomes a part of the convention itself. Irony, as Mudrick himself accepts, is not necessarily comic, and although he proves convincingly that it is a major comic technique in Jane Austen, it is not the only one.

My thesis is an attempt to see Jane Austen mainly as a comic artist, to see her technique as an expression of her comic vision. I have emphasised throughout the social and moral basis of her comedy and have attempted a detailed analysis of the social and moral assumptions behind her comedy. I make no apology for this preliminary discussion of values in a work on comedy. Jane Austen's comedy is deeply social and moral. Its stuff is the inter-relationship of social and moral values, and she compels us to accept these values by the confident assurance with which she establishes her world.

In my discussion of the various aspects of Jane Austen's comic technique, I have not been bound by any particular definition of comedy and have only cited famous definitions

where I have felt they elucidated my discussion. I have distinguished various comic devices by which the author evaluates character and situation and have dwelt frequently on her ironic devices. But I have tried to see irony as something larger than just a device and constituting a central comic idea: the idea that there is often a difference between what is and what ought to be, a contradiction between the ideal and the reality.

REFERENCES

References to the text of Jane Austen's novels are from The novels of Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (Oxford, 1933).

References to the texts of the Juvenilia and Sanditon are from Minor Works, ed. R.W. Chapman, (Oxford, 1954).

ITALICS

Underlinings of words in passages quoted, unless marked with asterisks, are the author's and not Jane Austen's.

CHAPTER ONE

SOCIAL AND MORAL VALUES: ACCEPTANCE
AND CRITICISM

Jane Austen's comedy is always critical. Like most comic writers she has her own set of values to which she refers in discriminating between ideal and non-ideal behaviour. Any discussion of her comedy must therefore begin with an analysis of values.

She creates a world which reflects a coherent system of values in the society 'outside' the novel, a system which she largely accepts but also modifies and sometimes criticises. I want to examine these values and try to distinguish between what she accepts and what she criticises. For detailed references I shall concentrate on Emma and Mansfield Park.

Social Stratification

In Emma the most obvious social assumption is that of a clearly stratified society. Highbury society has a delicately graded hierarchy, a kind of ladder with everybody's position plotted beforehand and permitting only very slight upward movements. The characters are themselves made conscious of this kind of social organisation. Emma Woodhouse, infuriated by Mr. Elton's presumption in wanting to marry her, spells out his real position on the social scale:

But - that he should talk of encouragement, should consider her as aware of his views, accepting his attentions, meaning (in short), to marry her! - should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind! - look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself showing no presumption in addressing her!... 1

Miss Bates reveals a similar awareness of rank when she talks incoherently about having fancied Mr. Elton would marry Emma:

... I had always rather fancied it would be some young lady hereabouts; not that I ever - Mrs. Cole once whispered to me - but I immediately said; 'No, Mr. Elton is a most worthy young man' - but ... At the same time, nobody could wonder if Mr. Elton should have aspired. - 2

The very language used by the people to indicate distinctions in rank suggests a system of gradation. They use the language of measurement, often a measurement of distance or height. Emma talks of having imagined Robert Martin to be a degree or

1. Emma, pp.135-136.

2. p.176.

two nearer gentility. She commends Harriet's good taste in raising her thoughts (as she imagines) to Frank Churchill. Mr. Knightley, annoyed by Harriet's refusal to marry Robert Martin, questions her claim to any connection higher than Martin and thinks she will soon consider no one within her reach as good enough for her. Robert Martin himself, contemplating his proposal to Harriet, has scruples about her being considered (because of her association with Emma) in a rank of society above him.

Jane Austen herself appears to accept this principle of social stratification. Her handling of an incident at the Crown involving Emma, Mrs. Weston and Frank Churchill, indicates this. Frank's refusal to understand what is involved in organising a ball at the Crown for all families in Highbury is regarded by Emma as an inelegant indifference to a confusion of rank. This judgment is Emma's own but one feels that it can just as well be the author's. The reference to Frank's indifference is merely incidental to the real point made by the incident at the Crown. Jane Austen is not concerned with the rights and wrongs of Emma's judgment of Frank Churchill, but with Frank himself. She seems to show him as too eager and enthusiastic about the concerns of Highbury, perhaps less than sincere. This is how she describes his behaviour at the Crown:

He was immediately interested. Its character as a ball-room caught him. ... He saw no fault in the room, he would acknowledge none which they suggested. ... He could not be persuaded that so many good-looking houses

as he saw around him, could not furnish numbers enough for such a meeting; and even when particulars were given and families described, he was still unwilling to admit that the inconvenience of such a mixture would be anything, or that there would be the smallest difficulty in everybody's returning into their proper place the next morning. 1

This is not a recording of Emma's thoughts, but an authorial description, dramatising and emphasising Frank Churchill's enthusiasm. Jane Austen is suggesting that his over-enthusiasm is merely a means of covering up his real reason for wanting a ball at the Crown, that (as we come to know later) he is only looking for an opportunity to meet Jane Fairfax socially without arousing any suspicions. The summary of his arguments reveals her assumption of the principle of stratification as a matter of course: notice particularly 'mixture' and 'their proper place'.

In an essay on Emma, Arnold Kettle raises the issue of social stratification and severely criticises Jane Austen for unquestioningly accepting what he calls "class society":

The limitation and narrowness of the Hartfield world is in the limitation of class society. And the one important criticism of Jane Austen (we will suspend judgment for a moment on its truth) is that her vision is limited by her unquestioning acceptance of class society. That she did not write about the French Revolution is as irrelevant as that she did not write about the Holy Roman Empire: they were not her subjects. But Hartfield is her subject, and no sensitive contemporary reader can fail to sense here an inadequacy
 2

1. pp. 197-198.

2. Arnold Kettle, "Emma," Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs: N.J. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 119. Kettle's essay originally appeared as a chapter in his Introduction to the English Novel (London, 1951).

This may be felt to be valid social criticism. It is certainly difficult for most twentieth century critics to admire the standards and values of a rigidly stratified society, but it seems to me that the class basis of Jane Austen's standards cannot seriously limit the value of Emma. Jane Austen does not after all pretend to represent a complete image of the ideal world in her novels, and we cannot quarrel with her for not rebelling against a generally accepted system of social organisation. Besides, as Kettle himself accepts, Jane Austen is able to present 'positive'¹ values even within the limits of the stratified society. These positive values are revealed in a criticism of her own society, and to discover them we must distinguish between her own implied flexibility of attitude and the rigid class-consciousness of her characters.

Jane Austen ridicules and rejects condescension and snob-bishness. She censures Emma for being obsessively conscious of rank and mocks her 'dilemma' over the invitation from the Coles. Before giving Emma's reaction to the Coles's invitation she gives us an authorial description, distinguishing between the social position of the Coles and their moral qualities:

The Coles had been settled some years in Highbury, and were very good sort of people - friendly, liberal, and unpretending; but, on the other hand, they were of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel. 2

In the midst of her description she shifts to Emma's consciousness, in order, I suggest, to differentiate her own attitude

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1. "Positive" from a radical mid-twentieth century stand-point.
 2. Emma, p.207.

towards the Coles from Emma's:

The regular and best families Emma could hardly suppose they would presume to invite - neither Donwell, nor Hartfield, nor Randalls. Nothing should tempt her to go, if they did; and she regretted that her father's known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish. 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. This lesson, she very much feared, they would receive only from herself; she had little hope of Mr. Knightley, none of Mr. Weston. 1

The two points of view are different. While the author neutrally records the social facts about the Coles: "of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel," Emma is anxious to let them know of their inferiority. The comment that Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston do not share Emma's view, highlights Emma's individual and complacent view-point and suggests the author's censure.

Later Jane Austen deliberately reproduces the contents of the Coles's invitation to Hartfield:

They would have solicited the honour earlier, but had been waiting the arrival of a folding-screen from London, which they hoped might keep Mr. Woodhouse from any draught of air, and therefore induce him the more readily to give them the honour of his company. 2

The invitation in both style and content expresses a respect and a genuine consideration for Mr. Woodhouse, and invalidates Emma's accusation that the Coles are presumptuous. Emma's softened attitude after reading the invitation shows that she inwardly wishes to accept it and is only kept back by petty notions of superiority:

1. p.207.
2. p.208.

She owned that, considering everything, she was not absolutely without inclination for the party. The Coles expressed themselves so properly - there was so much real attention in the manner of it - so much consideration for her father. ... Upon the whole, she was very persuadable..1

Jane Austen points to her attitude with critical irony:

Emma did not repent her condescension in going to the Coles. The visit afforded her many pleasant recollections the next day; and all that she might be supposed to have lost on the side of dignified seclusion, must be amply repaid in the splendour of popularity. She must have delighted the Coles - worthy people, who deserved to be made happy! - And left a name behind her that would not soon die away. 2

The rejection of condescension and snobbishness is even better illustrated by Jane Austen's presentation of what I would call Emma's "psychological warfare" with Robert Martin. Emma dismisses Robert Martin as below her notice long before she actually sees him; the imagery of measurement and height marks the dismissal:

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. 3

Later when she suspects Harriet's warm feeling for him she begins a series of arguments contrived to convince Harriet that he cannot be a suitable husband for her. First she assumes that he is ignorant: "Mr. Martin, I suppose, is not a man of information beyond the line of his own business. He does not read?" 4 Later she argues that he is too young to settle:

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1. p.208.
 2. p.231.
 3. p.29.
 4. p.29.

Only four and twenty. That is too young to settle. His mother is perfectly right not to be in a hurry. They seem very comfortable as they are, and if she were to take any pains to marry him, she would probably repent it. 1

Harriet continues to feel warmly towards the Martins however, and Emma is obliged to shift her position and to work on Harriet's malleability in other ways. She lures her with ideas about consequence, trying to make her believe that her father must have been a gentleman:

The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful as to your associates. There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman's daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by everything within your own power, or there will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you. 2

Emma's comment is immediately followed by the irony of Harriet's reply:

Yes, to be sure - I suppose there are. But while I visit at Hartfield, and you are so kind to me, Miss Woodhouse, I am not afraid of what anybody can do. 3

The contrast here is between Emma's conviction and Harriet's lack of conviction about her claims. Harriet's confidence and sense of security stem not so much from a conviction of her social claims as from the protection of Emma Woodhouse and all she stands for. Her attitude makes nonsense of Emma's argument, both in its grasp of reality and its faith in friendship.

When Emma sees Robert Martin she judges him purely from his appearance, seeing him as very clownish and totally without air. She compares him with specimens of well-educated men of

1. p.30.
2. p.30.
3. p.31.

"gentle birth," finds him inferior and commends Mr. Weston and Mr. Elton for their deportment, walk and speech, equating good manners with carriage, air and appearance. In fact, she judges Martin purely from the seventeenth century French conception of the honnête homme¹ and her assumptions about Martin's appearance echo the sentiments of the Chesterfield Letters more than Jane Austen's. It is Emma, and not Jane Austen who attaches great importance to what Chesterfield calls bienséance.

Equally stressed in Jane Austen's criticism of Emma, is her dishonesty in praising Mr. Elton's manner and in elevating it as so much above Martin's. Emma's real view of Mr. Elton, as we soon discover, is unfavourable. Her opinion of him is negative and detached:

... she thought very highly of him as a good-humoured, well-meaning, respectable young man, without any deficiency of useful understanding or knowledge of the world. 2

1. "Honnête", therefore, in the courtier conception had nothing to do with morals or even with religion, which were private affairs. The "honnête homme" was a man of noble birth who was qualified to become a courtier owing to his capacity to please, his social adroitness and his mastery of bienséance, his gallantry towards women, his grace, his taste, his gaiety and his conversational powers ..." Harold Nicolson, Good Behaviour, p.177.

Jane Austen herself makes Knightley say in Emma: "Your amiable young man may be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very amiable, have very good manners, and be very agreeable, but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people ..." p.149.

2. Emma, p.35.

And he was really a very pleasing young man, a young man, whom any woman not fastidious might like. 1

He was reckoned very handsome; his person much admired in general, though not by her, there being a want of elegance of feature which she could not dispense with. 2

When Emma comes to read Martin's letter to Harriet she is even more disconcerted to discover his language to be almost that of a gentleman, expressing "good sense, warm attachment, liberality and propriety," but tries to argue herself out of this interpretation. She entertains the possibility that Martin's sister wrote his letter, but this is unconvincing even to herself. She is stuck. She has nothing else to urge against Martin so again she works on Harriet: "I lay it down as general rule, Harriet, that if a woman doubts* as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him."³ She threatens her by hinting at the possibility of severing their relationship, though Harriet does not fully understand such threats. When Harriet finally decides to refuse Robert Martin, Emma is happy and satisfied: "Dear affectionate creature! You confined to the society of the illiterate and vulgar all your life! ..." ⁴ This rings hollow, because Robert Martin has not proved himself illiterate and vulgar, but on the contrary, has given evidence of his literacy and delicacy

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1. p.35.
 2. p.35.
 3. p.52.
 4. p.54.

while Harriet, whom Emma is so anxious to preserve from the illiterate and vulgar, has not really impressed us with her literacy and cultivation.

When Emma listens to Harriet's account of her meeting with Elizabeth Martin and her brother, she recognises their conduct to be the result of real feeling and pities them. But her pity lasts only a moment, and she soon assumes her usual condescension:

She was obliged to stop and think. She was not thoroughly comfortable herself. The young man's conduct, and his sister's, seemed the result of real feeling, and she could not but pity them. As Harriet described it, there had been an interesting mixture of wounded affection and genuine delicacy in their behaviour. But she had believed them to be well meaning, worthy people before; and what difference did this make in the evils of the connection? It was folly to be disturbed by it. Of course, he must be sorry to lose her - they must be all sorry. - Ambition, as well as love, had probably been mortified. They might all have hoped to rise by Harriet's acquaintance: and besides, what was the value of Harriet's description? - so easily pleased - so little discerning; - what signified her praise? 1

The very train of Emma's thoughts here show her wilfully moving away from an apprehension of the wounded feelings of Martin and his sister. She clutches at various convenient excuses, trying to force a justification for her insensitiveness, but the speciousness of her excuses is brought out by the haste and evasiveness of her argument. Notice for instance, how she

1. pp.179-180.

takes two big steps in the one sentence: "But she had believed them to be well-meaning, worthy people before, and what difference did this make in the evils of the connection? It was folly to be disturbed by it." Later, she makes up a less disturbing explanation of the conduct of Martin and his sister, one which offers her the easy course of rejecting a man motivated more by ambition than by genuine feeling. Finally, exasperated, she throws off the whole burden of her recognition by rejecting the value of Harriet's description and retreating into a comfortable assumption that it was all a mere trifle.

I have dwelt in detail on Emma's "psychological warfare" with Robert Martin because I think it helps us to distinguish Jane Austen's acceptance of the stratified society from her rejection of snobbishness and condescension. The entire story of Emma's relationship with Harriet and Martin is fully dramatised and very rarely does Jane Austen intrude with omniscient comment. She expects us to participate in the drama and make our own judgments. Marvin Mudrick in Irony as Defense and Discovery¹ and Andrew Wright in Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure² rightly conclude that Emma is a snob but argue that her snobbishness does not amount to a basic criticism[^] of the beliefs of her class. On the other hand,

1. Mudrick, p.185.

2. Wright, p.138.

F.W. Bradbrook¹ and John Burrows² think that Emma is not a snob. John Burrows even argues that Emma's interference in Harriet's relationship with Robert Martin is urged by her almost artistic desire to improve Harriet through contact with the cultivated life at Hartfield. Joseph Duffy³ adds an interesting Freudian tinge by proposing that Emma takes on Harriet in order to enjoy through her an experimental relationship with a man and that Martin's sexuality (implied in his occupation) is excessively disturbing to a young gentle-woman of limited experience. These are interesting interpretations - all based chiefly on Emma's conscious effort to disregard what is worthy in Robert Martin.

But I am suggesting another interpretation. There is the possibility that in showing Emma deliberately refusing to acknowledge what is worthy in Martin, and so egocentrically manipulating Harriet as if she were a puppet whose feelings can be shuffled and reshuffled, Jane Austen is being very severely critical of her heroine. I would even go further and propose that she classes Emma with those insufferable caricatures, Sir Walter and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, characters who are absolutely incapable of comprehending or accepting any values beyond their own narrow confines. Of course, she portrays Emma as something decidedly more than just a snob.

1. Jane Austen: Emma (London, 1961) p.19.

2. "Jane Austen's Emma" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of London, 1967), p.33.

3. "Emma: The awakening from innocence," English Literary History, xxi (March 1954), 46.

She caricatures and dismisses Sir Walter and Lady Catherine but keeps Emma close to us, enabling us to judge her, to condemn her, to feel kindly towards her, and sometimes even to admire her.

Materialism

Another outstanding value of the society reflected and created by Jane Austen is its materialism. Jane Austen's society is an essentially materialistic society with an almost instinctive response to material values. The very metaphors of her prose style imply a consistent set of values: the values of commerce and property. Characters are defined in terms of the property they possess. Take this description of Lady Bertram for instance:

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. ¹

Or this description of Mr. and Mrs. Norris: "... Mr. and Mrs. Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year."² Or again, this account of Mr. Darcy in Pride and Prejudice:

1. Mansfield Park, p.2.
2. p.2.

... Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. 1

Fortune and consequence are criteria for recognition and respect and no one is ashamed of this. Mr. Darcy arouses the curiosity of his neighbours partly because he is reported to have ten thousand pounds a year, and both Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas are prepared to excuse his pride on account of his good looks and his fortune:

"His pride," said Miss Lucas, "does not offend me* so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a right* to be proud."

"That is very true," replied Elizabeth, "and I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine." 2

Fortune and consequence are also highly important considerations in questions of love and marriage, and in fact, Jane Austen's province is always marriage in an acquisitive society. As Emma contemplates Harriet's marriage to Mr. Elton she stresses the material benefits of a good marriage:

... if their only object is that you should in the common phrase be well* married, here is the comfortable fortune, the respectable establishment, the rise in the world which must satisfy them. 3

Emma's own attitude to marriage is significant. She boasts to Harriet that she would not marry without love:

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1. Pride and Prejudice, p.10.
 2. p.20.
 3. Emma, p.76.

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield, and never never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's. 1

But she does admit that she is able to take such an uncompromising stand because of her material self-sufficiency:

'Fortune I do not want; ...' Her immediate response to Jane Fairfax's engagement to Frank Churchill is a recognition of material advantage: "Her days of insignificance and evil were over. - She would soon be well, and happy, and prosperous."²

Emma's views about marriage, property and consequence are shared by both Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston. Mr. Knightley's reaction to Mrs. Weston's marriage is significant. Talking of what he supposes ought to be Emma's reaction to the marriage, he reveals his own attitude:

... But she knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor's advantage; she knows how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor's time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision. ... 3

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1. p.84.
 2. p.403.
 3. p.11.

Never once in Mr. Knightley's entire list of Mrs. Weston's advantages does he mention love. He assumes that her happiness depends on security and material comfort. When he reasons out Emma's chances of success in making a match between Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton he expresses a similar attitude to marriage:

Depend upon it, Elton will not do. Elton is a very good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as anybody. Elton may talk sentimentally, but he will act rationally. He is as well acquainted with his own claims, as you can be with Harriet's. He knows that he is a very handsome young man, and a great favourite wherever he goes; and from his general way of talking in unreserved moments, when there are only men present, I am convinced that he does not mean to throw himself away. ¹

Mr. Knightley's evaluation defines his own mixed attitude to Mr. Elton. He knows that Elton is incapable of an imprudent marriage and that no consideration is likely to override his worldly attitude, but he is not contemptuous of him for knowing the value of a good income or for being rational instead of sentimental about marriage. By referring to him as not intending "to throw himself away" and by saying "he will act rationally" he seems to imply understanding if not sympathy for this kind of prudence.

It is with a similar assumption of prudence that Mrs. Weston is prepared to consider the possibility of a marriage between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax. In Mrs. Weston's view

1. p.66.

it is not necessary that Knightley should be in love. If he cares enough for Jane to want to make her mistress of Donwell Abbey, that is sufficient. Replying to Emma's confident assertion that Mr. Knightley does not love Jane Fairfax, she says laughingly: "... perhaps the greatest good he could do them, would be to give Jane such a respectable home."¹ Not surprisingly, such a view is feasible enough to alarm Emma and induce her to find out Mr. Knightley's real intentions.

What is Jane Austen's own attitude to this kind of materialism? It is difficult to see that it is different from Mr. Knightley's or Mrs. Weston's. We cannot justifiably say that she consistently regards love as the only allowable basis of marriage. We might suppose that her description of the marriage of Sir Thomas Bertram and Miss Maria Ward in Mansfield Park is critical, if it were not that almost immediately after this description she gives a critical account of another kind of marriage, that of Miss Frances and Mr. Price, which brings out the relative merits of the Bertram match. She does not explicitly say that Miss Frances married for love: "[she] married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly."² But she shows very clearly the dreary consequences of a fortuneless marriage. For Miss Frances, who is so like Lady Bertram,

1. p.225.

2. Mansfield Park, p.2.

sinks into obscurity and squalor while Lady Bertram is transformed into the respectable wife of a Member of Parliament. Lady Bertram certainly has an advantage over Mrs. Price here, an advantage which Fanny recognises later on:

Of her two sisters, Mrs. Price very much more resembled Lady Bertram than Mrs. Norris. She was a manager by necessity, without any of Mrs. Norris's inclination for it, or any of her activity. Her disposition was naturally easy and indolent, like Lady Bertram's; and a situation of similar affluence and do-nothingness would have been *much* more suited to her capacity, than the exertions and self-denials of the one which her imprudent marriage had placed her in. 1

In Mansfield Park Jane Austen admits that there is something positively pleasant about wealth, order and respectability. Her presentation of Jane Fairfax's problem in Emma seems to show a similar awareness of the importance of fortune and consequence. Jane Fairfax's circumstances are unfortunate. She has been educated in the superior surroundings of the Campbells and has become a truly cultivated, elegant, well-mannered and accomplished young lady who can make even the heroine feel inferior. But she has no fortune and must expect to earn her own living by becoming a governess. Jane Austen presents her problem sympathetically. As she describes the relationship between her and Miss Campbell she points out the unfairness with which fortune has treated Jane:

1. p.390.

They continued together with unabated regard however, till the marriage of Miss Campbell, who by that chance, that luck which so often defies anticipation in matrimonial affairs, giving attraction to what is moderate rather than to what is superior, engaged the affections of Mr. Dixon, a young man, rich and agreeable, almost as soon as they were acquainted; and was eligibly and happily settled, while Jane Fairfax had yet her bread to earn. 1

The circumstances surrounding Jane Fairfax's engagement to Frank Churchill are rather obscure. Jane Austen implies but does not openly portray Jane's feelings about Frank. She only gives Frank's view of their engagement and this only in a summary form at the end of the novel. This oblique and partial view may be an understandable plot-convenience, but I suggest that it may also well be Jane Austen's way of clouding Jane's motivation in consenting to a secret engagement. Although there is no suggestion that she entered into the engagement solely for security, there is no doubt that Frank Churchill's consequence is presented as a clear advantage in her case, and I wonder if there is not even a slight hint that she feels this herself. Jane Austen's sympathetic portrayal of Jane's economic position and prospects seems to bring out the pressures and choices: when, for instance, Mrs. Elton insists on finding a suitable situation for her, Jane refuses to commit herself and replies:

1. Emma, p.165.

... When I am quite determined as to the time, I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something - Offices for the sale - not quite of human flesh - but of human intellect. 1

As we realise later, Jane obviously knows at this time that she is likely to marry Frank Churchill but her attitude to the question of employment is one of horror and contempt. Perhaps all we can say is that Jane Austen brings out Jane's awareness of her economic and social position, and thus makes us aware of the economic aspects of her marriage to Frank Churchill.

In spite of her sympathies with the material aspirations of people in her society Jane Austen is very much aware of the dangerous problems involved in such aspirations. She sees that concern for material values can make people reject other values, and she frequently demonstrates the clash between material aspirations and other values. She is aware for instance of the peculiar social circumstances which make a sensible girl like Charlotte Lucas marry a pompous fool like Collins. But she cannot acquit Charlotte for failing to reject a man she knows to be a fool and to whom she is indifferent. For Jane Austen, the ability to discriminate between moral and material values is an essential criterion of strength

1. p.300.

of character. The strong character ought to be able to separate the very desirable material advantages inherent in a match from the moral objections to it. This is the standard by which Elizabeth Bennet judges Charlotte Lucas. As she explains to Jane, Charlotte's case involves questions of principle and integrity which cannot be easily argued away:

You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence and insensibility of danger, security for happiness. 1

Jane Austen accepts this moral standard but I think she is also mildly critical of Elizabeth for failing to recognise (or, while recognising, underestimating) the very cramping economic pressures acting on Charlotte. She obviously disapproves of Charlotte's absolutely single minded desire for security, but her presentation of Elizabeth's reaction to Charlotte's decision suggests that she thinks Elizabeth a little smug in her condemnation of Charlotte:

The strangeness of Mr. Collins's making two offers of marriage within three days, was nothing in comparison of his being now accepted. She had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage. Charlotte the wife of Mr. Collins, was a most humiliating picture! - And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen. 2

1. Pride and Prejudice, pp.135-136.
2. p.125.

Elizabeth is obviously judging Charlotte from her own circumstances. At twenty-one, she can afford to think that such a marriage could not even be tolerably happy. She forgets that Charlotte is twenty-seven, unmarried and living in a society which regards marriage as the only career open to a woman. Later in the novel, she is made to qualify her early judgment.

In Mansfield Park the clash between material aspirations and moral values is even more subtly demonstrated when the high-minded Sir Thomas is shown as susceptible to material values. His handling of the problems involved in Maria's engagement and marriage to Rushworth and Henry Crawford's proposal to Fanny, dramatises his failure to discriminate between the material advantages of a match and the moral objections to it. In spite of all his initial good will towards Rushworth, Sir Thomas quickly comes to realise that he is after all an ignorant and inferior young man. After this realisation we expect that the grotesqueness of the match between him and Maria should strike him as it has struck us. But it does not. Or if it does, his desire to enjoy the advantages of such a match argues the impression away. His first reaction after getting to know the real Rushworth is of course consistent with his general concern for right conduct. He observes Maria's attitude towards him and finds that it is one of coldness and indifference.

Like the truly principled father he muses: "Advantageous as would be the alliance, and long standing and public as was the engagement, her happiness must not be sacrificed to it."¹ This is fine moral sentiment but it is only as far as Sir Thomas is willing to go. He does confront Maria but the confrontation is too brief to enable him to be certain of her truthfulness:

With solemn kindness Sir Thomas addressed her; told her his fears, inquired into her wishes, entreated her to be open and sincere, and assured her that every inconvenience should be braved, and the connection entirely given up, if she felt herself unhappy in the prospect of it. He would act for her and release her. Maria had a moment's struggle as she listened, and only a moment's: when her father ceased, she was able to give her answer immediately, decidedly, and with no apparent agitation. She thanked him for his great attention, his paternal kindness, but he was quite mistaken in supposing she had the smallest desire of breaking through her engagement; or was sensible of any change of opinion or inclination since her forming it. She had the highest esteem for Mr. Rushworth's character and disposition, and could not have a doubt of her happiness with him. Sir Thomas was satisfied; too glad to be satisfied perhaps, to urge the matter quite so far as his judgment might have dictated to others. 2

Sir Thomas does not notice Maria's struggle to be truthful, or if he does, is unwilling to pursue his recognition any further, fearful of what the result might be. He begins instead to see compensations for Rushworth's shortcomings and even begins to philosophise on what he imagines to be the advantage to her family of a young woman who does not marry for love. The last sentence of the passage I quote sums up Jane Austen's judgment of his conduct.

1. Mansfield Park, p.200.

2. pp.200-201.

Sir Thomas's relationship to moral and material values is given a slightly sinister touch when it is revealed in his attitude towards Fanny after Henry Crawford has proposed to her. He is so taken up with the material advantages of the match that he assumes at once that Fanny will immediately accept the offer. He puts into play his usual moral sentiments, showing sincere but limited feeling for Fanny. He assures Fanny he only wants her happiness and advantage though it never occurs to him that these might depend on her refusing Henry Crawford. He appears to be doing his duty by her but actually frightens and intimidates her, making her think of herself as conceited and ungrateful:

We had better put an end to this most mortifying conference. Mr. Crawford must not be kept longer waiting. I will, therefore, only add, as thinking it my duty to mark my opinion of your conduct - that you have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character, the very reverse of what I had supposed. 1

Afterwards when Sir Thomas decides to send Fanny to Portsmouth, he is deliberately planning to deprive her of the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, and to incline her to a juster estimate of Henry Crawford's offer:

He certainly wished her to go willingly, but he as he certainly wished her to be heartily sick of home before her visit ended; and that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer. 2

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1. p.318.
 2. p.369.

Yet he is anxious to conceal his prime motive and have it appear on the surface as a right and proper measure, and when Edmund thinks the plan good and right, he satisfies and deceives his conscience by his decisive "then so it shall be." The discrepancy between his worldliness and his benevolence is voiced by Fanny:

She had hoped that to a man like her uncle, so discerning, so honourable, so good, the simple acknowledgment of settled dislike* on her side would have been sufficient. To her intense grief she found that it was not. 1

The tension between moral and material values is not just limited to the field of marriage. It operates in other spheres of life. Consider for instance Sir Thomas' long speech at the beginning of the novel as he outlines the problems that Fanny's adoption would pose:

There will be some difficulty in our way ... as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram.* I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorise in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you (Mrs. Norris) must assist us in our endeavours to choose exactly the right line of conduct. 2

The tension is between Sir Thomas's concern for Fanny's happiness and his anxiety to maintain the material distinctions between her and his own children. He is genuinely concerned about the moral considerations which should guide Fanny and his daughters

1. p.318.

2. pp.10-11.

in their personal relations. For instance, he would not encourage arrogance in his daughters and he would not want them to think too lowly of their cousin. But that the question of material distinctions should have been such a difficulty in his way is a sign of his own preoccupation with the values of rank and fortune. That such an honourable, kind and well-meaning man should be so governed by money and class is a sign of the power and prevalence of social and economic values. The novel forces him to qualify or at least scrutinise his values.

In Sense and Sensibility the tension between moral and material values is dramatised in the second chapter where John and Fanny Dashwood discuss the kind of assistance that the late Mr. Dashwood wished them to give to his widow and daughters. John and Fanny both deceive themselves by thinking they are governed by society's standards of behaviour. For instance, John sees himself as a man of honour who must keep his promise once it is made, and Fanny pretends to be governed by a reasonable and generally accepted standard:

To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy, would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods, who were related to him ^{only} by half blood, which she considered as no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount. 1

1. Sense and Sensibility, p.8.

Fanny merely falsifies the issues. She talks of the "dear little boy" being robbed and impoverished, exaggerating the implications of her husband's decision and implying that by doing his duty by his mother-in-law and sisters he would be failing his own son. By emphasising that the Dashwood girls have no real claim on his generosity, she suggests that John owes a duty to his own son and not to them and strengthens this suggestion by giving it the air of a generalisation: "It was very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist between the children of any man by different marriages."¹ She appeals to her husband's sentiments with such emotive words as "dear little boy" and "poor little Henry," giving a very false picture of a poor defenceless child being forced to give up his fortune.

John still sees himself as a man of honour who must keep his promise: "But as he required the promise, I could not do less than give it The promise, therefore, was given, and must be performed. ... Something must be done for them whenever they leave Norland."² While keeping to this picture of himself he finds a way out to manoeuvre and to sound as uncommitted as possible. "Something" can be anything, and Fanny soon exploits this ambiguity. John falls into her trap and he begins now to think of "reasonable" reasons why the

1. p.9.

2. p.9.

"something" need not be three thousand pounds: "why, to be sure, ... that would make a great difference. The time may come when Henry will regret that so large a sum was parted with. If he should have a numerous family, for instance, it would be a convenient addition."¹ He sees now that if the sum was diminished by half it would be better for all parties and he eases his conscience by hypocritically asserting that five hundred pounds would be a prodigious increase to the fortune of the Dashwoods. Having settled things according to his own private and prudent standards, John still believes he has acted reasonably and decorously: "I would not wish to do anything mean ... One had rather, on such occasions, do too much than too little. No one, at least, can think I have not done enough for them."² He and Fanny carry on this pattern of falsifications and self-deceptions until they have managed to convince themselves that it would be unnecessary and indeed highly indecorous to do more for the widow and her children than occasional neighbourly acts, which eventually, much to their annoyance, prove to be impracticable. Unlike Sir Thomas, John and Fanny Dashwood have no sense of honour or duty, but their moral pretences and arguments show the strength and cunning of materialistic values.

1. p.9.

2. pp. 9-10.

Decorum

In all her novels Jane Austen is concerned with evaluating correct conduct. The discrimination of desirable and undesirable behaviour is clear because the norm is always established. It is either dramatised or represented by the characters of whom she herself approves. Their reaction to certain forms of behaviour usually shows whether or not they are "normal" or "abnormal". For instance, in Emma, we can ourselves detect flaws and failings in Mrs. Elton's manners but our impressions are finally confirmed by what Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston think about them. The first judgment of Mrs. Elton is Emma's:

She did not really like her. She would not be in a hurry to find fault, but she suspected that there was no elegance: - ease, but not elegance. - She was almost sure that for a young woman, a stranger, a bride, there was too much ease. Her person was rather good; her face not unpretty; but neither feature, nor air, nor voice, nor manner, were elegant. 1

Later we form our own impression of Mrs. Elton as we see her in conversation with Emma. Her manner of addressing Mr. Knightley particularly grates on us. We compare it with correct forms of address and conclude that this familiarity of address is indecorous and improper. Our impressions are confirmed by other reliable characters. Mr. Knightley's

1. Emma, p.270.

reaction when Emma comments on Jane Fairfax's intimacy with Mrs. Elton is that "Miss Fairfax is as capable as any of us of forming a just opinion of Mrs. Elton. Could she have chosen with whom to associate, she would not have chosen her."¹ Mrs. Weston's opinion is that "poor Miss Bates may very likely have committed her niece and hurried her into a greater appearance of intimacy than her own good sense would have dictated. . . ." ² Both Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston imply that Jane Fairfax's good sense ought to detect what is wrong and unacceptable in Mrs. Elton. Later Frank Churchill is horrified at Mrs. Elton's presumption in addressing Jane Fairfax by her Christian name when she is not fully acquainted with her. As we contemplate Frank's horror we begin to recall that at the Christmas Eve party at Randalls both Emma and Mrs. Weston are surprised at Mrs. Elton's presuming to address Emma with an assumed familiarity. We think of Emma's astonishment at Mrs. Elton's calling Mr. Knightley "Knightley" and our impressions about Mrs. Elton are confirmed. A consensus is established, the 'reliable' characters supporting the less 'reliable' in this respect.

Jane Austen shows her appreciation for the kind of superficial decorum that these "reliable" characters uphold but she emphasises a more profound and humane version of it. When she shows the valetudinarian Mr. Woodhouse overcoming his nervous fears and giving Emma permission to stay till the

1. p.286.

2. p.286.

end of the Coles's dinner party, she appears to me to be stressing the decorum as an index of humane and imaginative sensibility:

"But you do not consider how it may appear to the Coles. /says Mr. Weston to Mr. Woodhouse/ Emma's going away directly after tea might be giving offence. They are good-natured people, and think little of their own claims; but still they must feel that anybody's hurrying away is no great compliment; ..."

"No, upon no account in the world. Mr. Weston, I am much obliged to you for reminding me. I should be extremely sorry to be giving them any pain. ... My dear Emma, we must consider this. I am sure, rather than run the risk of hurting Mr. & Mrs. Cole, you would stay a little longer than you might wish." 1

This sensitive understanding of what other people feel is what constitutes humane decorum, and Jane Austen is here commending Mr. Woodhouse's responsiveness once he is nudged into awareness by Mr. Weston. However, she criticises other characters for wanting this awareness. She censures John Knightley, for instance, for being intolerant of Mr. Woodhouse's "peculiarities" and "fidgetiness". John Knightley's attitude to Mr. Woodhouse is first described from Emma's point of view:

He was not a great favourite with his fair sister-in-law. Nothing wrong in him escaped her ... hardly any degree of personal compliment could have made her regardless of that greatest ~~fault~~ ^{fault} of all in her eyes which he sometimes fell into, the want of respectful forbearance towards her father. 2

Jane Austen then cuts in with a less biased explanation of his behaviour:

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1. pp.210-211.
 2. p.93.

... he had not always the patience that could have been wished. Mr. Woodhouse's peculiarities and fidgettiness were sometimes provoking him to a rational remonstrance or sharp retort equally ill-bestowed. 1

She regards his rational remonstrances and sharp retorts as "ill-bestowed," implying that it is not worth anybody's while to be rational with a man as vulnerable and irrational as Mr. Woodhouse.

When she dramatises the conversation between the Woodhouses at Hartfield Jane Austen draws a contrast between John Knightley's behaviour on the one hand and the behaviour of George Knightley and Emma on the other. She shows John Knightley as impatient and harsh with Mr. Woodhouse while his brother George sensitively prevents friction by steering their conversation away from dangerous topics. At the Christmas party at Randalls she makes a similar juxtaposition of the conduct of John and the behaviour of Emma and George Knightley; Mr. Woodhouse is instantly alarmed when it begins to snow, and the rest of the party react in various revealing ways: John Knightley triumphantly taunts his father-in-law: "This will prove a spirited beginning of your winter engagements, sir. Something new for your coachman and horses to be making their way through a storm of snow."² Mr. Weston equally alarms Mr. Woodhouse by cheerfully suggesting that they might be snowed up. Emma and Mrs. Weston try to

1. p.93.

2. p.126.

reassure Mr. Woodhouse and to divert his attention from his son-in-law. George Knightley slips off quietly to verify the report and returns to declare the roads to be still passable. Finally he and Emma solve the problem by saying that they should go home. Here Jane Austen brings out a sharp moral contrast between the unsociable and inconsiderate John Knightley, the sociable and inconsiderate Mr. Weston, and the sensitive and responsible Emma, George Knightley and Mrs. Weston. By this criticism and commendation she shows her appreciation of that sensitive awareness of the feelings of others which is the depth and essence of decorum, and which marks it as more than a superficial value.

Emma's unkind remark to Miss Bates at Box Hill is the most important breach of decorum in Emma. By this time Jane Austen has gradually strengthened our trust in Mr. Knightley's judgment, and it is he who confronts Emma with the moral implications of her behaviour. Emma's reaction to his argument is significant:

She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed - almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! - How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in anyone she valued! 1

1. p.376.

This is sincere, touching and most unlike Emma's previous contritions. The language itself has intensity and depth; "agitated," "mortified," "grieved," all express deep emotion, and "forcibly struck" indicates the extent to which Mr. Knightley's argument has moved her. She does not merely see the truth of his representation but feels it "at her heart." For the first time in the novel we see her weep and are convinced of her genuine sorrow and sincere repentance.¹

Social decorum is also a key value in the delineation of Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility. Jane Austen's attitude towards Marianne is censorious. She presents her as an intelligent, sensitive and perceptive young girl, capable

1. Mr. Knightley's part as the exponent of right conduct and decorum might lead us into thinking of him as the moral judge in the novel, expressing all that Jane Austen considers good and admirable about the society in Highbury. We must remember however that in the moral debate on whether or not Frank Churchill is obliged to visit his father after the latter's marriage, it is ironically, Emma and not Mr. Knightley who takes a more realistic and imaginative view. Although they both agree that Frank has not exerted himself enough in doing his duty, it is still Emma who is prepared to consider circumstances likely to prevent him from doing his duty. Mr. Knightley, too optimistic and too ready to believe that moral consciousness is universal, argues rather naively that the Churchills are sure to recognise the necessity of Frank's doing his duty. It is Emma who argues that respect for right conduct is not necessarily felt by everybody, and it is from Emma's psychological insight that we realise the rigidity of Knightley's moral stand against Frank Churchill. It seems that Jane Austen does not approve the unbending and strictly moral stand that Mr. Knightley is apt to take.

like Elinor, of judging character, but unlike her, uncompromising and rigid in her philosophy of individual freedom. Marianne believes that what society calls propriety is a mere fraud established to restrict the individual, and she is unmoved when Elinor suggests the propriety of some self-command in her relationship with Willoughby. She hates all concealment. To her, the restraint of sentiments that are not shameful in themselves is unnecessary and dishonest, a disgraceful subjection of reason and passion to convention. To Marianne, even the decorous tolerance of dull and uninteresting people is a nuisance, and at the Middletons' home in Barton, with characteristic inattention to the forms of general civility, she refuses to take part in the game proposed by Lady Middleton:

"Your ladyship will have the goodness to excuse me* - you know I detest cards. I shall go to the pianoforté; I have not touched it since it was tuned." And without further ceremony, she turned away and walked to the instrument. Lady Middleton looked as if she thanked heaven that she* had never made so rude a speech.

"Marianne can never keep long from that instrument you know, ma'am," said Elinor, endeavouring to smooth away the offence; "and I do not much wonder at it, for it is the very best toned pianoforté I ever had." 1

Jane Austen's argument (and Elinor's) is that Marianne is denying her social obligations; that she is shutting herself off from the world in her discovery of love and freedom; and that as a member of society she cannot separate herself

1. Sense and Sensibility, pp.144-145.

even from its dull obligations. She is also ironically showing that in her uncompromising stand for love, sensitivity and individuality, Marianne is making an error of judgment. She is recognising only two kinds of people: those like Elinor and Edward who are intelligent and sensitive, and those like the Middletons and the John Dashwoods who are insensitive, dishonest and stupid. She is refusing to recognise the essential goodness of heart and kindness of Mrs. Jennings and failing to see that Sir John is only a good-natured foolish old man and not as selfish and calculating as the John Dashwoods. She is classifying human nature insensitively and unintelligently.

In his detailed defence of Marianne against what he calls Jane Austen's "unfairness," Marvin Mudrick describes Marianne's unconventional attitude as "resoluteness against feigning."¹ He sees her outburst after Mrs. Ferrars' contemptuous treatment of Elinor's painting as inevitable and uninhibited, and believes that Marianne ought to be commended for her frankness and sincerity. He really seems to assume (like Marianne) that social decorum is necessarily a form of hypocrisy. I suggest that he takes Marianne too seriously and too literally when she says:

... I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull and deceitful 2

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1. Mudrick, p.70.
 2. Sense and Sensibility, p.48.

To Jane Austen, decorum is not equivalent to deceit. It means exerting ourselves, for example, to keep silent when we have the urge to argue, to appear politely attentive even when we are bored, and to try to understand people whose ideas and dispositions are different from our own. This is not a subjugation of the understanding or conscious deceit, but a call for some sensitiveness towards the feelings of other people. Jane Austen finally proves her point when Marianne learns to accept this standard:

... I saw in my own behaviour since the beginning of our acquaintance [with Willoughby] last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. ... The kindness, the unceasing kindness of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt, To the Middletons, the Palmers, the Steeles, to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust; with an heart hardened against their merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention. ¹

Jane Austen is always anxious however to distinguish between surface politeness or charm, and a genuine consideration for people. This anxiety, I suspect, partly underlines her characterisation of Frank Churchill. She is continually warning us about him, asking us not to be taken in by his politeness and charm. We are made to sense some ambiguity in his character even before he appears in person. We know that he has written "fine flourishing" letters to his father and mother-in-law, yet has not paid them a visit since their marriage, though he has found time to be in a pleasure resort

1. pp.345-346.

at Weymouth. This visit, as Mr. Knightley explains, is imperative:

I suspect they do not satisfy Mrs. Weston. They hardly can satisfy a woman of her good sense and quick feelings: standing in a mother's place, but without a mother's affection to blind her. It is on her account that attention to Randalls is doubly due, and she must doubly feel the omission. Had she been a person of consequence herself, he would have come I daresay; and it would not have signified whether he did or no. Can you think your friend behind-hand in these sort of considerations? Do you suppose she does not often say all this to herself? 1

Frank Churchill's apparent insensitiveness towards Mrs. Weston's feelings contrast with his promises and protestations, and Jane Austen asks us, through Mr. Knightley, not to correlate agreeable manners with genuine decorum:

... your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very 'amiable,' have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him. 2

When Frank does arrive in Highbury, his agreeable manners and his gallantry are strongly emphasised. His attitude to Mrs. Weston is seen by Emma as extremely proper:

... on seeing them together, she became perfectly satisfied. It was not merely in fine words or hyperbolic compliment that he paid his duty; nothing could be more proper or pleasing than his whole manner to her - nothing could more agreeably denote his wish of considering her as a friend and securing her affection. 3

At the Coles's dinner party his gallantry is singled out:

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1. Emma, p.149.
 2. p.149.
 3. p.196.

In he walked, the first and the handsomest; and after paying his compliments en passant to Miss Bates and her niece, made his way directly to the opposite side of the circle, where sat Miss Woodhouse; and till he could find a seat by her, would not sit at all. 1

Later when the dancing begins the gallant young man comes up with "most becoming gallantry" to Emma and securing her hand leads her to the top.

Almost simultaneously, Jane Austen, with a great command of nuance, urges us to look beyond Frank's charm and gallantry. She presents him mostly from Emma's point of view but manages all the same to suggest a reserve or qualification. Most of Emma's first impressions, for example, are cautiously worded and emphasise surface and appearance:

He did really look and speak as if in a state of no common enjoyment 2 ... Some of the objects of his curiosity spoke very amiable feelings ... and though in some points of pursuit or observation, there was no positive merit, they shewed, altogether, a good will towards Highbury in general, which must be very like merit to those he was with. 3 He seemed to have all the life and spirit, cheerful feelings and social inclinations of his father, and nothing of the pride or reserve of Enscombe 4 ... He shewed a very amiable inclination to settle early in life, and to marry from worthy motives. 5 His ideas seemed more moderate - his feelings warmer. 6

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1. p.220.
 2. p.191.
 3. p.197.
 4. p.198.
 5. p.204
 6. p.203.

As she gives an account of Frank's first visit to Hartfield, the author makes use of Emma's consciousness but stretches her narrative technique to its limits in order to guide our judgment of Frank:

Their subjects in general were such as belong to an opening acquaintance. On his side were the inquiries, - "Was she a horse-woman? - Pleasant rides? - Pleasant walks? - Had they a large neighbourhood? - Highbury, perhaps, afforded society enough? - There were several very pretty houses in and about it. - Balls - had they balls? - Was it a musical society?"

But when satisfied on all these points, and their acquaintance proportionably advanced, he contrived to find an opportunity, while their two fathers were engaged with each other, of introducing his mother-in-law, and speaking of her with so much handsome praise, so much warm admiration, so much gratitude for the happiness she secured to his father, and her very kind reception of himself, as was an additional proof of his knowing how to please - and of his certainly thinking it worth while to try to please her. He did not advance a word of praise beyond what she knew to be thoroughly deserved by Mrs. Weston; but undoubtedly, he could know very little of the matter. He understood what would be welcome; he could be sure of little else. 1

The author's aim is to cast a doubt over Frank Churchill's sincerity. The words advance, proportionably, contrived, all suggest deliberation. His agreeableness is not spontaneous. He seems too anxious to please and works too hard at it. In Jane Austen this kind of over-enthusiasm is suspect, and we are here being warned not to be taken in by it. In fact, as it turns out at the end of the novel, Frank deliberately shows more than he feels in order to single out Emma as his choice

1. pp.191-192.

and divert attention from his real relationship with Jane Fairfax:

My behaviour to Miss Woodhouse indicated, I believe, more than it ought. - In order to assist a concealment so essential to me, I was led on to make more than an allowable use of the sort of intimacy into which we were immediately thrown. 1

The deceptiveness and power of this kind of agreeableness are demonstrated in its effect on Emma; in the way her judgment of him is gradually clouded by his charming manners. Gradually, the author shows the effect of Frank's agreeableness on Emma's judgment and urges us to take an objective look at Frank ourselves. When Frank talks in glowing terms about having always had the greatest curiosity to visit Highbury, Emma senses a disparity between his professed curiosity and his delay in paying the visit but is only interested in the way he "handles" the falsehood:

... but still if it were a falsehood, it was a pleasant one, and pleasantly handled. His manner had no air of study or exaggeration. He did really look and speak as if in a state of no common enjoyment. 2

Later, when Frank suddenly goes off to London, supposedly to have a hair cut, Emma at first sees all the implications of his conduct and severely criticises him:

... there was an air of foppery and nonsense in it which she could not approve. It did not accord with the rationality of plan, the moderation in expense,

1. p.438.
2. p.191.

or even the unselfish warmth of heart which she had believed herself to discern in him yesterday. Vanity, extravagance, love of change, restlessness of temper, which must be doing something, good or bad; heedlessness as to the pleasure of his father and Mrs. Weston, indifference as to how his conduct might appear in general; he became liable to all these changes. 1

But before long, she is making excuses for Frank's conduct and basing her judgment on superficial details of appearance and manner:

I do not know whether it ought to be so, but certainly silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way. Wickedness is always wickedness, but folly is not always folly. It depends upon the character of those who handle it. Mr. Knightley, he is not* a triffling, silly young man. If he were, he would have done this differently. He would either have glorified in the achievement, or been ashamed of it. There would have been either the ostentation of a coxcomb, or the evasions of a mind too weak to defend its own vanities. - No, I am perfectly sure that he is not triffling or silly. 2

We begin now to dissociate ourselves from Emma's judgment and to take an objective look at Frank. We sense a contrast for instance between his gaudy civility and the quiet considerateness of Mr. Knightley. Both men are kind to Miss Bates and Harriet but their kind acts are presented differently. Mr. Knightley sends baked apples to the Bateses and fetches them to the Coles's party in his carriage, but these are quiet deeds and no one hears of them until Miss Bates tells all. After Mr. Elton has cruelly snubbed Harriet, Mr. Knightley relieves Harriet's suffering by dancing with her, and only Emma

1. p.205.

2. p.212.

is aware of the unobtrusive act of kindness. In contrast, Frank Churchill's kindness to the Bateses is more conspicuous and less disinterested. When he occupies himself "most deedily" with repairing Mrs. Bates's spectacles, he is obviously both doing a kind act and exploiting the opportunity of being with Jane Fairfax.

At Box Hill, we get another view of Frank Churchill. His flirtation with Emma might be unfair to Jane Fairfax but it is even more unfair to Emma. Emma does not know that she is being made use of, but after a second reading, we do. We look behind the surface and find that both Jane and Frank are engaged in a lovers' quarrel at Emma's expense. When Frank says to Emma:

Will you choose a wife for me? - I am sure I should like anybody fixed on by you. ... Find somebody for me. I am in no hurry. Adopt her, educate her. ... She must be very lively, and have hazel eyes. I care for nothing else. ¹

Emma might be pleased and flattered, but he is not at all interested in pleasing her and is actually communicating with Jane Fairfax, deliberately hurting her because he loves her.

At the end of the novel when news of Frank's secret engagement to Jane Fairfax breaks out, even Emma, who has all along been charmed by his manner and gallantry, realises that he lacks something more substantial. She condemns the

1. p.373.

callousness behind his charm and gallantry:¹

What right had he to come among us with affection and faith engaged, and with manners so very*dis-engaged? What right had he to endeavour to please, as he certainly did - to distinguish any one young woman with persevering attention, as he certainly did - while he really belonged to another? - How could he tell what mischief he might be doing? - How could he tell that he might not be making me in love with him? - Very wrong; very wrong indeed. 2

Later, when she rejects Mrs. Weston's lenient view of his conduct and substitutes a more severe moral judgment she seems to me to be rejecting gallant frivolity and preferring genuine decorum:

Impropriety! Oh! Mrs. Weston - it is too calm a censure. Much, much beyond impropriety! - It has sunk him, I cannot say how it has sunk him in my opinion. So unlike what a man should be! None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life. 3

1. Frank Churchill's letter of explanation to Mrs. ^{Weston}~~Churchill~~ finds Emma responding to charm and gallantry again but this time with a mature discrimination. She still finds the charm irresistible, but it does not cloud her judgment: "This letter must make its way to Emma's feelings. She was obliged, in spite of her previous determination to the contrary, to do it all the justice that Mrs. Weston foretold. As soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible; every line relating to herself was interesting, and almost every line agreeable; and when this charm ceased, the subject could still maintain itself by the natural return of her former regard for the writer. ... She never stopped till she had gone through the whole; and though it was impossible not to feel that he had been wrong, yet he had been less wrong than she had supposed, - and he had suffered, and was very sorry. ... p.444.

2. pp.396-397.

3. p.397.

In Mansfield Park Jane Austen makes a similar distinction between easy agreeable manners and genuine consideration for people. With the same concern for nuance, she presents the charming façade of the Crawfords together with their less attractive traits of selfishness and inconsiderateness. The charming Mary Crawford, for instance, is often careless of the feelings of other people. She speaks ~~irreverently~~^{disrespectfully} about her uncle and appears indifferent to Fanny's feelings when she talks slightingly of sea captains. Like his sister, Henry Crawford has lively pleasant manners. He is good-natured and kind but also selfish and inconsiderate. His light-hearted flirtation with both Maria and Julia reveals a callous insensitiveness, and even his impressive courtship of Fanny is at first tinged with selfishness:

But I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart. . . . No, I will not do her any harm, dear little soul! I only want her to look kindly on me, to give me smiles as well as blushes, to keep a chair for me by herself wherever we are, and be all animation when I take it and talk to her; to think as I think, be interested in all my possessions and pleasures, try to keep me longer at Mansfield, and feel when I go away that she shall never be happy again. I want nothing more. 1

Jane Austen shows the deceptiveness and strength of the Crawford charm when she shows Edmund, the most morally promising of the Bertrams, succumbing to it. Edmund's judgment of Mary Crawford, like Emma's of Frank Churchill, is based on little superficial details of manner and wit:

1. Mansfield Park, pp.229-231.

The right of a lively mind, Fanny, seizing whatever may contribute to its own amusement or that of others; perfectly allowable when untingered by ill humour or roughness; and there is not a shadow of either in the countenance or manner of Miss Crawford, nothing sharp, or loud, or coarse. 1

Later he rejects Fanny's moral censure of Miss Crawford and substitutes a merely social one:

Ungrateful is a strong word. I do not know that her uncle has any claim to her gratitude*; his wife certainly had; and it is the warmth of her respect for her aunt's memory which misleads her here. . . . I do not censure her opinions*; but there certainly is* impropriety in making them public. 2

His judgment of Henry Crawford is equally distorted. When Fanny accuses Henry of having behaved improperly and unfeelingly during the theatricals he quickly comes to his defence with a facile explanation:

. . . a man like Crawford, lively, and it may be, a little unthinking, might be led on to - There could be nothing very striking, because it is clear that he had no pretensions; his heart was reserved for you. 3

Only Fanny is shrewd enough⁴ not to be influenced by Henry Crawford's agreeable manners. But even Fanny has to struggle through temptations. Henry's reading of Shakespeare, for instance, charms her, and his assistance to her brother softens her censure: "She might have disdained him in all the dignity of angry virtue in the grounds of Sotherton or the theatre at Mansfield Park; but he approached her now with rights that

1. p.64.

2. p.63.

3. p.350.

4. She is also, of course, helped by being in love with Edward.

demanded different treatment."¹ Good judgment does prevail, and after careful observation and analysis Fanny comes to the conclusion that, for all his charm and good nature, Henry Crawford lacks a certain delicacy and regard for other people. His very persistence in courting her appears to her as "a gross want of feeling and humanity where his own pleasure was concerned."²

Jane Austen's delineation of the Bertrams presents a similar conflict between superficial decorum and genuine humane decorum. The surface order and decorum of the Mansfield establishment are greatly emphasised and contrasted with the chaos and confusion represented by the Prices. Horrified by the disorder in her parents' home in Portsmouth, Fanny contrasts the atmosphere with Mansfield Park:

... in her Uncle's house there would have been a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, an attention towards everybody which there was not here. 3

At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody's feelings were consulted. 4

Mansfield Park is held up in contrast to Portsmouth as an infinitely more desirable place. On the surface it is. Sir

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1. p.328.
 2. p.329.
 3. p.383.
 4. pp.391-392.

Thomas Bertram, head of the Mansfield establishment is a far more respectable and responsible person than Mr. Price. He is much more committed to his family than Mr. Price ever is, and there is a decided smoothness in the running of the Mansfield household which is totally absent in Portsmouth. This is partly because Mansfield Park has the advantage of being a large house with a large staff and servants but it is also partly because all its members subscribe to an external decorum which keeps life tolerable and smooth. Propriety is the watchword in the Park. Sir Thomas, contemplating the adoption of Fanny Price, is anxious to choose exactly the right line of conduct. The Bertram children, for all their stubbornness in going ahead with the theatricals, are each aware of its impropriety. When Tom Bertram tries to justify their acting by carelessly arguing that Sir Thomas encouraged their acting talents, Edmund immediately puts the picture right:

It was a very different thing. - You must see the difference yourself. My father wished us, as school-boys, to speak well, but he could never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict. 1

The Mansfield decorum and morality are also placed in opposition to and defended against the town values of the Crawfords. Miss Crawford's views on marriage are regarded by

Mrs. Grant as frivolous and cynical, and her ~~irreverence~~ ^{disrespect} towards her uncle is censured by both Fanny and Edmund as indecorous. Later, the Mansfield inhabitants disagree with the Crawfords on the duties of a clergyman. While Edmund, Sir Thomas and Fanny agree on the importance of a clergyman's duties, Miss Crawford thinks a clergyman is nothing, and Henry Crawford feels that a clergyman need not necessarily reside in his parish. It is not only in their views that the Crawfords are opposed by the Mansfield set. Their morals too are found objectionable. Fanny rejects Henry Crawford on moral grounds, and Edmund finally rejects Mary Crawford because of her inability to distinguish between a serious moral breach and a mere foolish action. But for all their incompatibility with the Mansfield values, the Crawfords are themselves very much attracted to them. Henry Crawford finds Fanny's steadiness of conduct and observation of decorum very attractive and his sister appreciates Edmund's steadiness, depth of feeling, and integrity. Before leaving Mansfield Park Mary confesses admiration for what in her view Mansfield stands for:

You have all so much more heart* among you, than one finds in the world at large. You all give me a feeling of being able to trust and confide in you; which, in common intercourse, one knows nothing of. l

But the subject of Mansfield Park is not just the anti-thesis between different sets of values. It is the great house, Mansfield Park itself and its people; and the Mansfield values, in spite of their desirableness and their exterior attraction, are not flawless. They are not entirely free from inconsistencies and discrepancies, and we are warned not to be taken in by the surface decorum and moral sentiments. When Sir Thomas returns to Mansfield from the West Indies for instance, he finds the house in chaos and disorder, and we are told he quickly reinstates his authority and restores order. But as we soon find out, he merely restores an appearance of order. He reinstates his authority by resuming his place at the head of the dinner table and removes all outward signs of disorder by pulling down the stage, dismissing the scene-painter and burning all copies of Lovers' Vows. But this is as far as he is willing to go. He does not probe deeper into the causes of disorder, and content merely with the appearance of order, deceives himself that all is normal. In an omniscient comment the author points to his delusion and censures his complacency:

Sir Thomas saw all the impropriety of such a scheme among such a party, and at such a time, as strongly as his son had ever supposed he must; he felt it too much, indeed, for many words; and having shaken hands with Edmund, meant to try to lose the disagreeable impression, and forget how much he had been forgotten himself as soon as he could, after the house had been cleared of every object enforcing the remembrance, and restored to its proper state. He did not enter into any remonstrance with his other children: he was more

willing to believe they felt their error, than to run the risk of investigation. The reproof of an immediate conclusion of everything, the sweep of every preparation would be sufficient. 1

Later, as she describes the evening scene at Mansfield, she contrasts the outward smoothness of the atmosphere with the hidden emotional disturbances of the individuals and suggests that, contrary to what Sir Thomas thinks, all is not well at Mansfield:

The evening passed with external smoothness, though almost every mind was ruffled; and the music which Sir Thomas called forth from his daughters helped to conceal the want of real harmony. 2

Throughout the novel Jane Austen continually reminds us to look beyond the façade of the Mansfield establishment. As she presents and scrutinises its members she suggests that its decorum really lacks "active principle."³ For instance, she reveals certain unsatisfactory human relationships behind the orderly facade of family life. Mrs. Norris, to whose care Sir Thomas literally commits the education of the Bertram children, turns out as the most unscrupulous and immoral character in the

1. p.187.

2. p.191.

3. In his self-recriminations at the end of the novel Sir Thomas himself confirms this deficiency:

He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting within, that [the Bertrams] had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments - the authorised object of their youth - could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. (p.463)

novel. Like Sir Thomas she is acutely aware of social correctness, but merely refers to it and sometimes even falsifies it in order to justify her own viciousness. Her dislike of Fanny makes her furious at the thought of her accompanying the family to Sotherton, and she appeals to social decorum to justify her cruelty:

Mrs. Norris was very ready with the only objection which could remain, their having positively assured Mrs. Rushworth, that Fanny could not go, and the very strange appearance there would consequently be in taking her, which seemed to her a difficulty quite impossible to be got over. It must have the strangest appearance! It would be something so very unceremonious, so bordering on disrespect for Mrs. Rushworth, whose own manners were such a pattern of good-breeding and attention, that she really did not feel equal to it. 1

For all her sense of correctness she fails to see any impropriety in the idea of the theatricals, and when Sir Thomas expresses disappointment at her failure to guide the young children, she is surprised and confounded. Without any moral sense herself she is unable to instil any in the young children. When the Miss Bertrams talk disparagingly of Fanny, all she is able to do is offer them bits of flattering and spurious "morality." To their expressed amazement at Fanny's stupidity she merely answers:

To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed, and shows a great want of genius and emulation. But all things considered, I do not know whether it is not as well that it should be so, for, though you know (owing to me) your Papa and Mamma are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are; on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference. 2

1. p.78.
2. p.19.

The Miss Bertrams themselves have easy agreeable manners which are only "carefully formed to general civility and obligingness."¹ They give themselves no airs and appear free from petty vanities but that is only because "their vanity was in such good order."² They are outwardly respectful towards their father but their indifference to his absence from Mansfield and their eagerness to engage in theatricals at a time when his life might be in danger, is shown as insensitive. Their attitude to Fanny, while not outrightly insensitive, is nevertheless patronising, and their attitude towards each other is not any more sensitive.

The author carefully presents their family visit to Sotherton to reveal the orderly appearance of togetherness and the actual breakdown of human relationships. The family sets out for Sotherton primarily to explore the possibility of improving the estate but as it turns out, the real improvement needed is in the area of their own personal relationships. The breakdown of relationships is carefully dramatised. Every little detail is important in bringing this out: the composition of the party, the seating of the passengers, their gestures and their most trivial remarks. The tension and jealousy between Maria and Julia is suggested in something as trivial as seating arrangements on the journey. Both Maria

1. p.34.

2. p.34.

and Julia covet the seat in the barouche-box, next to Henry Crawford, and both meditate on how best to secure it "with the most appearance of obliging the other." When Mrs. Grant decides in Julia's favour the tension between the two sisters intensifies:

Happy Julia! Unhappy Maria! The former was on the barouche-box in a moment, the latter took her seat within, in gloom and mortification ... 1

At the grounds of Sotherton, the group appear to be a pleasant close-knit family but deep down they do not care much about each other. Julia, with obvious design, carelessly alludes to Maria's impending marriage to Rushworth while Maria, insensitive to Rushworth's feelings, flirts with Henry Crawford. After their first meeting in the chapel, the party breaks up into little groups according to interest and inclination. Edmund and Mary Crawford, engaged in their own lovers' argument and insensitive to Fanny's feelings, lose themselves in the wilderness and forget that Fanny has been waiting alone for them. Julia, accidentally thrown into the company of Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris, maintains an appearance of politeness, only to explode later on:

... I have had enough of the family for one morning. Why, child, I have but this moment escaped from his horrible mother. Such a penance as I have been enduring, while you were sitting here so composed and so happy! 2

1. p.80.
2. p.100.

The religious sanctions underlining social behaviour break down completely at Sotherton, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the scene between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram in the Wilderness. The elements of diction and imagery combine to create a picture of order. The action takes place in a wilderness, which significantly is an artificial one, made up of planted wood and "laid out with too much regularity."¹ It is sealed off by an iron gate through which the characters strive to penetrate. Like the wilderness, the Mansfield decorum is too rigid and artificial. It is founded upon a system which is itself a fallacy, and survives merely through the authority of Sir Thomas. Away from the influence of Mansfield Park and Sir Thomas, Maria Bertram grows restless. Her moral values crumble in the face of temptation and she defies the restraints imposed by the "iron gates." Having succumbed to temptation she is anxious to maintain appearances and under the pretence of discussing improvements she flirts with Henry Crawford. The ambiguity of their discussion on improvements allows them the chance to indulge and at the same time cover up their illicit emotions. Their exchange is carefully constructed, and we can almost trace the course of Henry Crawford's seduction of Maria. Henry's impressions about Sotherton fall into two parts. The first part, spoken in his ordinary tone, is simple and unambiguous, a reasonable

1. p.91.

answer to Maria's enquiries. The second part: "I do not think that I shall ever see Sotherton again with so much pleasure as I do now."¹ is said with a lowered voice and an emphasis on the first person pronoun. Henry is obviously addressing Maria and not talking about Sotherton, and Maria's own embarrassment shows she understands his meaning. She keeps up the pretence and replies in the same vein. Having now understood each other they temporarily discard the shield provided by their discussion on Sotherton and carry out a direct tête-à-tête. Henry encourages the jealousy between Maria and Julia, luring Maria with suggestions about her superiority over Julia: "I could not have hoped to entertain you* with Irish anecdotes during a ten miles' drive."² Later, they return to the ambiguities and innuendoes of their discussion on Sotherton. Henry Crawford says: "You have a very smiling scene before you"³ and Maria interprets this both literally and figuratively. For her, the literal scene is symbolic of all the comforts and elegancies that Rushworth can offer, and the iron gates and the haha, the sanctions and restraints that go with marriage. She is attracted to all the glamour of the "smiling scene" but cannot bear the moral sanctions of an engagement or (later) a marriage. Henry urges her on with cunning and persuasive words:

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1. p.98.
 2. p.99.
 3. p.99.

And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited. 1

His literal reference to "key," "edge of the gate" and "Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection," conceal a real solicitation. Maria gives in. She squeezes through the gate but is unwilling to accept responsibility for her actions and blames Mr. Rushworth: "Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key!"² From this scene we can predict the pattern of Maria's future relationship with Henry Crawford. We can tell that she would want to have her cake and eat it, to defy restraints and sanctions while keeping up an appearance of order.

Like the visit to Sotherton, the theatricals at Mansfield create situations which lead to the breakdown of order and decorum. The question of whether or not to take part in the performance of Lovers' Vows becomes a social as well as a moral question. The social reasons are clearly outlined by Edmund. First, private theatricals are generally open to objection. Second, it would show great want of feeling to be acting plays when their father might be in danger in the

1. p.99.

2. p.99.

West Indies. Last, it would be imprudent on Maria's account as her unofficial engagement to Rushworth is regarded as presenting delicate problems of behaviour and conduct.

The Bertram children are all aware of the objections to the theatricals but they either evade the issues involved or justify them by reference to social correctness. Without any strong sense of principle or integrity, Maria and Julia are prepared to defend their actions by reference to what other respectable families do: "There could be no harm in what had been done in so many respectable families, and by so many women of the first consideration ..." ¹ Edmund stands firm by his principles until Mary Crawford decides to take part in the play. His judgment is then impaired and he compromises his principles while still trying to force a moral justification for his actions. He takes the part of Anhalt, he explains, in order to prevent the 'evil' of bringing Charles Maddox, a stranger, into a familiarity with Mansfield Park and an intimacy with Miss Crawford. He argues as if the evil of Maddox's presence in Mansfield is far greater than the evil of the private theatricals, but he is himself unconvinced of the validity of these claims and is uncomfortable at his stand, especially as Fanny unhappily but steadily refuses to give him her approbation:

1. p.128.

"But still it has not your approbation [he asks Fanny]
Can you mention any other measure by which I have a
chance of doing equal good?"

"No, I cannot think of anything else."

"Give me your approbation, then, Fanny. I am not
comfortable without it."

"Oh! Cousin"

"If you are against me, I ought to distrust myself -
and yet - ..." 1

During their play-acting the Bertrams appear concerned about each other's feelings but are really only concerned about their individual egos. Much emphasis is placed on propriety, and numerous compliments are exchanged, but no real decorum is practised. The very acts of choosing a play and casting expose the selfishness and vanity behind the outward display of compliments. Mr. Yates's vanity leads him to prefer the part of the Baron, but out of outward politeness he proposes to take the parts of ^{either} Frederick ~~and~~ ^{or} the Baron, compensating himself with the fact that there is a lot of ranting in both parts. Henry Crawford casually proclaims he likes both parts. But Miss Bertram, obviously intending the part of Frederick for him, craftily suggests Yates for the Baron. Julia, meaning to be Agatha, cunningly suggests this while appearing solicitous on Miss Crawford's account:

"This is not behaving well by the absent," said she. "Here are not women enough. Amelia and Agatha may do for Maria and me, but here is nothing for your sister, Mr. Crawford." 1

Maria also covets the part of Agatha but is obliged to conceal her desire and to hope that Julia might press it on her. Henry Crawford appears to have Julia's feelings at heart and counsels her against the part of Agatha but is actually manoeuvring to give the part to Maria:

"I must entreat Miss Julia* Bertram," said he "not to engage in the part of Agatha, or it will be the ruin of all my solemnity. You must not, indeed, you must not - (turning to her). I could not stand your countenance dressed up in woe and paleness. The many laughs we have had together would infallibly come across me, and Frederick and his knapsack would be obliged to run away!" 2

But Julia sees through his scheme:

Pleasantly, courteously it was spoken; but the manner was lost in the matter to Julia's feelings. She saw a glance at Maria, which confirmed the injury to herself; it was a scheme, - a trick; she was slighted, Maria was preferred; the smile of triumph which Maria was trying to suppress showed how well it was understood ... 3

And Henry Crawford, having now almost secured the part of Agatha for Maria, tries to pacify Julia with hollow compliments:

... [Julia's] talents will be wanted in Amelia. Amelia is a character more difficult to be well represented than even Agatha. I consider Amelia is the most difficult character in the whole piece. It requires great powers, great nicety, to give her playfulness and simplicity without extravagance. I have seen good actresses fail in the part. Simplicity, indeed, is beyond the reach of almost every actress, by profession. It requires a delicacy of feeling which they have not. It requires a gentlewoman - a Julia Bertram. 4

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1. p.133.
 2. p.133.
 3. p.133.
 4. p.135.

Maria, secure in the part of Agatha, can now afford to be magnanimous: "I am sure I would give up the part to Julia most willingly, but that though I shall probably do it very ill, I feel persuaded she would do it worse."¹

The actual preparation for Lovers' Vows poses all kinds of problems. Again, selfishness and vanity prevail, and there is a further disregard for individual feeling. Tom Bertram, disregarding Fanny's feelings, urges her to take part in the play, and Mrs. Norris seizes the opportunity to be cruel to Fanny. Julia, whose feelings are trifled with by Henry Crawford, ends up dejected, alone and extremely bitter.

Lovers' Vows itself becomes a medium for the acting out of real-life relationships. It is a story of illegitimacy and seduction, and the plot provides ideal situations for the real-life situations. None of the actors is interested in the artistic pleasure of producing a play, none looks at the parts with the professional eyes of an actor conscious of merely playing a part. For Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford the play is just an opportunity for continuing the flirtation begun in Sotherton. The situations of Agatha and Frederick, like the ambiguities of their discussion on improvements, provide them with an ideal cover for making love.

The situation of Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford is no less different. For instance, when Mary expresses embarrassment

1. p.136.

with the speeches of Amelia she does not think of herself in the context of the play as Amelia but as Mary Crawford expressing love for Edmund. The scene in the attic, where both Mary and Edmund rehearse their parts in Fanny's presence, is a symbolic acting out of a real love scene. The very appropriate speeches of Amelia and Anhalt give the lovers a chance to express and to cover up their emotions. Their actual reactions are not greatly emphasised. We are merely told that their spirits glowed and that Edmund's manner became increasingly spirited. But the "realness" of the love scene is shown in its effect on Fanny:

She^{*} could not equal them in their warmth. Her^{*} spirits sank under the glow of theirs, and she felt herself becoming too nearly nothing to both, to have any comfort in having been sought by either. They must now rehearse together. Edmund proposed, urged, entreated it - till the lady, not very unwilling at first, could refuse no longer - and Fanny was wanted only to prompt and observe them. She was invested, indeed, with the office of judge and critic, and earnestly desired to exercise it and tell them all their faults; but from doing so every feeling within her shrank, - she could not, would not, dared not attempt it; had she been otherwise qualified for criticism, her conscience must have restrained her from venturing at disapprobation. She believed herself to feel too much of it in the aggregate for honesty or safety in particulars ... In watching them she forgot herself; and agitated by the increasing spirit of Edmund's manner, had once closed the page and turned away exactly as he wanted help ... At last the scene was over, and Fanny forced herself to add her praise to the compliments each was giving the other; and when again alone, and able to recall the whole, she was inclined to believe their performance would, indeed, have such nature and feeling in it, as must ensure their credit, and make it a very suffering exhibition to herself. 1

1. p.170.

The clue to the feelings of Edmund and Mary is in the intense description of Fanny's jealousy. Her spirits sank, every feeling within her shrank, their performance was a very suffering exhibition to herself. Only a "real" love scene could produce the jealousy, hurt and despondency that Fanny shows. By exploiting his part as Anhalt to make love to Miss Crawford, Edmund not only compromises his principles but ironically also falls victim to his own prediction. It is, after all, Edmund who had earlier warned the others that non-professionals engaging in theatricals have forms of decorum and morality to struggle with:

True, to see real acting, good hardened real acting; but I would hardly walk from this room to the next to look at the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade, - a set of gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through. 1

In all, the emotions unleashed by the theatricals are all corrupt; the education of the Bertrams has been very superficial and has failed to inculcate a genuine decorum. At the end of the novel Sir Thomas himself realises this. His self-recriminations show him accepting the distinction between outward manners and real consideration for people:

He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared, they had never heard from any lips that could profit them. 2

1. p.124.
2. p.463.

Jane Austen does appreciate the kind of order and decorum practised at Mansfield Park. She admires the external smoothness of it and sees its advantage in preventing situations like the chaos in the Prices' household. But she argues that this kind of decorum will only survive when based on sound principles and a moral education. The balance between social and moral values, she shows, is very delicate indeed, and strong characters must be able to discriminate between them. They must constantly be on their guard, scrutinising their motives and exercising good judgment. This is a difficult adjustment to make, and even the most aware and honourable of her characters sometimes fail. It is about such possible failures, such likely inconsistencies that she reminds us. Her preoccupation with such failures of discrimination show her as not merely content with delineating the surface of society but as going deeper, pointing out inconsistencies and seizing upon these as material for comedy.

CHAPTER TWO

COMIC CHARACTERS

In a reply to James Stanier Clark, the English secretary to the Prince of Cobourg (who had earlier suggested that she should write a historical romance about the House of Cobourg), Jane Austen insisted on keeping to her own style and going on in her own way:

... I am fully sensible that an historical romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg, might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life in country villages as I deal in. But I could no more write a serious romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself and other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. 1

This is as far as she could go in defining herself as a comic writer and her comment is useful only in as much as it establishes her personal comic bent. It shows that she aimed at

1. R.W. Chapman, ed. Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others (Oxford, 1952) p.452.

laughing at herself and other people but it does not help much in analysing or defining the nature of her comic characters. Unlike Ben Jonson, Fielding or Meredith, she never defined her idea of comedy. I would rather not try to explain her comic sense by limiting myself to a specific definition, but will tentatively start from two definitions which seem to say something about her comedy and her comic characters.

Incongruity and the Ridiculous

Fielding defines comedy as the outcome of affectation: "The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation."¹ He enlarges his definition, stretching "affectation" to cover the incongruity between being and seeming:

Now, affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy: for as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavour to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues. 2

Enlarged in this way, this definition can be safely applied to Jane Austen's comedy. Some of her comic characters can be explained in terms of the disparity between their sense of importance and their influence and action.

1. Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, 'Everyman' ed. (London, 1956) p.xxx.

2. Fielding, p.xxx.

Minor characters like Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Elton are comic in the sense proposed by Fielding. These are all characters who remain convinced of their importance and dignity but are constantly rendered ridiculous because the facts of the novel show their insignificance and prove their delusion. Mr. Collins' sense of consequence is immediately apparent in the first letter to Mr. Bennet, in which he assumes a very condescending tone and regards himself as the important protegé of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, doing the Bennets a favour by offering them the "olive branch": "I flatter myself that my present overtures of good will are highly commendable. . . ."¹ When he arrives in Longbourn he remains firmly convinced of his central position, but the facts of the novel are quite different, and in spite of all his conceit and self-importance, the Bennets are unimpressed. Elizabeth sees him as an oddity. Mr. Bennet sees him as a fool, and Lydia and Kitty do not notice him at all. At Mrs. Phillips' party in Meryton, he sinks into the background as the girls devote their time to the officers of the Militia. Only Mrs. Phillips, out of courtesy, humours him.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh is similarly deluded. Conscious of her rank and wealth, she believes that she can exercise authority over everyone. It is her wish that Collins must marry, and he must. It is her wish that Darcy should marry Miss

1. Pride and Prejudice, p.63.

de Bourgh and he must, and it is her express wish that Elizabeth must not marry Darcy. The comic disparity between her sense of power and her actual influence is seen in the confrontation with Elizabeth Bennet in Longbourn, where it becomes clear that her authority can be foiled and denied by a mere girl and one of no rank. The exchange between her and Elizabeth becomes an anti-climax in the context of her great expectations. She hurries down to Longbourn in all her self-importance after hearing reports of a possible connection between Darcy and Elizabeth, to insist at once upon having such a report universally contradicted. In her conceit, she throws her weight about, and encouraged by Mrs. Bennet's servility, ventures suggestions in a superior and condescending tone. When she is alone with Elizabeth she proceeds in the same tone but her performance fails. Her arguments are passionate and confused, and she cannot distinguish between general principles and personal whims. When Elizabeth asks why she cannot marry Darcy she can only exclaim: "Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay interest, forbids it."¹ As Elizabeth refuses to be intimidated, Lady Catherine begins to diminish in power and authority. By her controlled and well-reasoned arguments Elizabeth lays bare the unreasonableness of her arguments; by distinguishing between personal whims, straightforward facts and moral obligations she demonstrates her intelligent superiority

1. p.355.

and reduces her passionate outbursts to childish nonsense. Her sense of Lady Catherine's powerlessness and stupidity gives her the confidence to assert her own value as an individual. To her suggestion that by marrying Darcy she might be quitting the sphere in which she has been brought up, Elizabeth proudly and confidently asserts:

In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal. 1

Her strong personality and steady stubbornly applied intelligence, sometimes even bordering on impertinence, shrinks every power or authority that Lady Catherine has assumed. When Lady Catherine declares: "I shall not go away, till you have given me the assurance I require." Elizabeth replies: "And I certainly never^{*} shall give it,"² and Lady Catherine cannot do much except make empty threats. Her last desperate attempt at intimidation loses its authoritative tone and falls comically flat: "I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet, I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased."³ This anticlimactic speech is based on the assumption that Elizabeth has herself to blame in forfeiting the compliments of a superior, and under the circumstances it is extremely funny. Elizabeth does not recognise any such assumption; she does not care, and naturally does not attempt to persuade her

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1. p.356.
 2. p.357.
 3. p.358.

ladyship to return to the house. By the time Lady Catherine leaves Longbourn, the grotesque power, authority and awe which had surrounded her have vanished. Jane Austen has finally driven home the dreary fact of her emotional and intellectual limitations, with nothing attendant to them that might excite sympathy or compassion.

The comic essence of Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Elton can be similarly explained. It derives from the contract between their ideas of their importance and the actual influence they exert in their worlds. They are both characters who are anxious to have it appear that they run their respective worlds. Within days of her arrival in Highbury, Mrs. Elton begins to see herself as the glamorous new arrival who will teach the inhabitants how to live. She finds that Mrs. Bates, Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Goddard and others are very backward in knowledge of the world and she wants to educate them in the ways of sophisticated society. But for all her officiousness she does not exert any influence in Highbury. Her great plan of spreading new social ideas comes to nothing. The very superior party she plans to give, the party during which her card tables would be set out with their separate candles and unbroken pack in the true style, never materialises. The much talked of visit from the Sucklings never takes place. Nor does she exert any influence at Donwell or at Box Hill. At Donwell Abbey she is ready to lead the way in gathering strawberries and in talking, but after thirty

minutes of trivial talk she is tired and has to retire to the shade. She appears even more insignificant at Box Hill. Her attempt to make up a party of her own (outside the influence of Emma and Frank Churchill) comprising herself, her husband and Jane Fairfax, is foiled when Jane bluntly declines to join her. Even her greatest achievement - securing Mrs. Smallridge's situation for Jane Fairfax - comes to nothing.

Mrs. Norris sees herself as the main force behind the Mansfield establishment. She believes herself responsible for the adoption of Fanny Price and the marriage of Maria Bertram and Mr. Rushworth and she deludes herself that she has influence over Lady Bertram and her children. But it does not take the reader long to discover her actual ineffectualness. After all the bustle and fuss of the preparation for the Sotherton visit, the visit that she looks forward to as her triumph, she remains in the background throughout, unaware of and untouched by all the drama that goes on, only emerging at the end of it, loaded with cream cheese and pheasants' eggs.

I have concentrated so far on the content of these self-inflated characters. But the comic disparity is a matter of form as well as subject-matter. Jane Austen expresses the absurd contradictions of her comic characters and their inflated ideas through what they directly reveal to the reader in their speech. She exposes the absurdity of Collins' formal rhetoric by bringing out the constant lack of proportion between the inflation of his style and the ordinariness of his matter.

A glaring example of this is the long speech with which he apologises to Mrs. Bennet for withdrawing his proposal of marriage to Elizabeth Bennet:

You will not, I hope, consider me as showing any disrespect to your family, my dear Madam, by thus withdrawing my pretensions to your daughter's favour, without having paid yourself and Mr. Bennet the compliment of requesting you to interpose your authority in my behalf. My conduct may I fear be objectionable in having accepted my dismissal from your daughter's lips instead of your own. But we are all liable to error. I have certainly meant well through the whole affair. My object has been to secure an amiable companion for myself, with due consideration for the advantage of all your family, and if my manner* has been at all reprehensible, I here beg leave to apologise. 1

The tone of Mr. Collins's speech is too composed, too strong and formal for what he describes. The words "pretension," "dismission," "withdrawal," "affair," are businesslike, unemotional and inappropriately used of a marriage proposal. For a man expressing an apology, his composure is insufferable. Expressions like "my conduct may I fear, be objectionable," "we are all liable to error," are highly suspicious, looking less like expressions of contrition than of indifference and smugness. More relevant to my purpose is the self-importance that Collins assumes in addressing Mrs. Bennet. We cannot fail to detect his smug satisfaction when he says patronisingly to her, "I have certainly meant well through the whole affair."² His tone is that of a man who feels he has done all he can and that the other person has himself to

1. p.114.

2. p.114.

blame. His vain reference to his consideration for the advantage of the Bennets is obviously meant to show what they have lost through Elizabeth's stubbornness, but the reader knows that he is merely deluding himself; that the advantage to which he so proudly refers is neither felt nor recognised by Elizabeth Bennet and her father. This is part of the long speech with which he proposes marriage to Elizabeth Bennet.

But the fact is, that being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father, (who, however, may live many years longer,) I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place - which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years. 1

This speech is made to work against itself. Collins obviously aims at giving an impression of intellectual refinement and moral consciousness but ironically he conveys just the opposite impression. His elaborate syntax is meant to sound clever but its inappropriateness shows his stupidity. The violent assertion, "I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters," presupposes a moral concern for the Bennets but the odd placing of "after the death of your honoured father" and "who however may live many years" strongly suggests that Mr. Bennet's death is prominent in his thinking. Such decorative insertions like "honoured father" and "melancholy event" also give him away. They are said with too much composure

and too little emotion, and register emotional disengagement rather than moral sensibility.

A similar stylistic technique is used in order to show up Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park. Her idea of herself as sensitive and generous is exposed through the irony of violently worded speeches. For instance, here she is indulging her sensibility while urging Sir Thomas to adopt Fanny Price:

"... I am sure I should be the last person in the world to withhold my mite upon such an occasion." 1

"... I should hate myself if I were capable of neglecting her. Is not she a sister's child? and could I bear to see her want, while I had a bit of bread to give her?" 2

"... with all my faults I have a warm heart: and, poor as I am, would rather deny myself the necessaries of life, than do an ungenerous thing." 3

The contrast is between the violent excess and formality of Mrs. Norris' language and the circumstances which call it out. The strong biblical associations of the rhythm and the vocabulary are suspect, and there is a further contrast between the assuredness of her claims to generosity and benevolence and their improbability: "... I would rather deny myself the necessaries of life than do an ungenerous thing - "4 This is too wild and extreme a claim to carry conviction, especially as there is no question of neglect, starvation, or sacrifice.

When on another occasion Mrs. Norris strives to draw attention to her sensibility the excesses of her language give her away:

1. Mansfield Park, p.6.

2. p.7.

3. p.7.

4. p.7.

... but my heart quite ached for him [the coachman] at every jolt, and when we got into the rough lanes about Stoke, where what with frost and snow upon beds of stones, it was worse than anything you can imagine, I was quite in an agony about him. And then the poor horses too! - To see them straining away! ... I could not bear to sit at my ease, and be dragged up at the expense of those noble animals. 1

Mrs. Norris uses ready made phrases and metaphors as a screen for the meaninglessness of her generous words. To Jane Austen, the use of metaphorical expressions as descriptions of feeling is particularly suspect when its main purpose is exhibitionist. In this speech the egocentricity is suggested in the profusion of "I's" and "my's": "I was quite in an agony ... I could not bear to sit at my ease ..." In the two sentences (my heart quite ached for him, I was quite in an agony about him) the undercutting cosiness of "quite" makes Mrs. Norris's heart-ache and agony very suspicious. The expression "every jolt"

1. p.189.

(a) Ironically, the impact of the excessive language, is lost when our attention is diverted to a new subject, as happens in Mrs. Norris' conclusion: "I caught a dreadful cold, but that I did not regard. My object was accomplished in the visit." (p.189) She unknowingly reveals that her sacrifice (getting out of the carriage and walking up to Sotherton) was not made on account of the "poor horses" but for the visit and all that she hoped it would achieve. This contradicts and renders meaningless, all her violent display of feeling for the horses.

(b) In a pointed omniscient comment, Jane Austen draws the contrast between Mrs. Norris's seeming generosity and her mean intentions: "As far as walking, talking, and contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality to others: but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends." (p.8.)

adds to the exaggeration of the language. What these excesses demonstrate is not Mrs. Norris' benevolence and selflessness but her emotional dryness.

In creating the irony of Mrs. Norris's ineffectual business Jane Austen uses a slightly different technique. Here comedy is derived from the contrast between what we are made to anticipate and what actually happens. For instance, Mrs. Norris takes to herself all the credit of Maria's engagement to Mr. Rushworth: "But I left no stone unturned. I was ready to move heaven and earth to persuade my sister, and at last I did persuade her."¹ When she talks in such very strong terms of leaving no stone unturned and of moving heaven and earth, we expect her activity to involve rather more exertion than the mere act of persuading the easily persuadable Lady Bertram.

This kind of anti-climax is not limited to Mrs. Norris's own speeches. Sometimes it is suggested in an omniscient description. At times Jane Austen begins a description of Mrs. Norris, leading the reader on to anticipate great activity¹ but suddenly ending with a qualifying irony which smashes his expectations. She tells us, for instance, that "Mrs. Norris, most happy to assist in the duties of the day, by spending it at the Park to support her sister's spirits, and drinking the health of Mr. and Mrs. Rushworth in a supernumerary glass or two, was all joyous delight."² The crucial words here are

1. p.189.
2. p.203.

"assist" and "duties," which both imply exertion and activity. The reader is thus led to expect Mrs. Norris to do something more active than merely supporting her sister's spirits and drinking the health of Mr. & Mrs. Rushworth. In this comic interplay between what is anticipated and what actually happens, Jane Austen is employing Mrs. Norris' own vocabulary and ironically pointing at the difference between her sense of her activity and her actual inactivity.

Anti-climax is also successfully used in the portrayal of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Pride and Prejudice. Here, the contrast lies in the almost grotesque awe and god-like reverence which Mr. Collins builds up and the ordinariness and petty frivolity of her character when she eventually appears. There is the sense of anticipation created by Collins' careful briefing: "Scarcely anything was talked of the whole day or next morning, but their visit to Rosings. Mr. Collins was carefully instructing them in what they were to expect, that the sight of such rooms, so many servants, and so splendid a dinner might not wholly overpower them."¹ The mood shifts to foreboding as the very formidable picture of Lady Catherine makes Maria Lucas frightened and apprehensive, and this mood is maintained and even heightened by Jane Austen's step-by-step descriptions:

1. Pride and Prejudice, p.160.

When they ascended the steps to the hall, Maria's alarm was every moment increasing, and even Sir William did not look perfectly calm. Elizabeth's courage did not fail her. 1

From the entrance hall, of which Mr. Collins pointed out, with a rapturous air, the fine proportion and finished ornaments, they followed the servants through an ante-chamber, to the room where Lady Catherine, her daughter, and Mrs. Jenkinson were sitting. 2

The mock seriousness and Gothic suspense of Jane Austen's tone is immediately followed by a markedly plain description of an ordinary person: "Lady Catherine was a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome."³ Miss de Bourgh is described in a similar anti-climax as "pale and sickly: her features, though not plain, were insignificant."⁴ Sir William Lucas is greatly awed by the occasion, but the reader is not, and his expectations are even further disappointed by the frivolity, showiness and pettiness of Lady Catherine's speech:

It is wonderful how many families I have been the means of supplying in that way. I am always glad to get a young person well placed out. Four nices of Mrs. Jenkinson's are most delightfully situated through my means; and it was but the other day, that I recommended another young person, who was merely accidentally mentioned to me, and the family are quite delighted with her ... Mrs. Collins, did I tell you of Lady Metcalfe's calling yesterday to thank me? She finds Miss Pope a treasure. 5

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1. p.161.
 2. p.161.
 3. p.162.
 4. p.162.
 5. p.165.

Comic Humours

The comic characters I have discussed are comic because of the incongruity between what they think they are and what they really are, but there are a number of Jane Austen's characters whose comic quality cannot be explained in terms of Fielding's definition.¹

In the seventeenth century, Ben Jonson used the scientific concept of "humours" to evolve a valuable definition of comedy:

It may, by metaphor, apply itself
 Unto the general disposition:
 As when some one peculiar quality
 Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
 All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
 In their confluxions, all to run one way. 2

1. Mary Lascelles has pointed out the limitations of this definition: "But affection, even so broadly conceived, is yet too narrow a defining term: it will not stretch to include all of Fielding's own comic characters. It will not hold Squire Western. And what meaning has it in relation to Jane Austen's mature comedy? What to Lady Bertram? Her comic essence is not to be explained by a disparity between being and seeming which comes of pretension or self-deception. There is no possibility here of self-deception - for that needs some exertion of the faculties inwards; nor of pretension - for that needs some exertion of the faculties outwards; and the most notable thing about Lady Bertram's faculties is their disuse." Lascelles, p.140.

2. Ben Jonson, "Every Man Out of His Humour," The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson, ed. Ernest Rhys, Vol. 1 (London, 1901) p.62.

The important point here is the fixity of the "peculiar quality." Ben Jonson's Morose¹ for example can be said to possess a "humour" because of his obsessive hatred of noise. Most of Jane Austen's comic characters have their peculiar "humours."

Mrs. Bennet's chief preoccupation is with getting her daughters well-married. This is the only motive that influences her actions, from the beginning of Pride and Prejudice to the end. The news that Netherfield Park has been let is important only as it increases the possibility of a match for one of her daughters: "...A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"² The very sequence of her thoughts in this speech reflects her obsession: her mind moves immediately from "four or five thousand a year" to "what a fine thing for our girls." Before Mr. Collins has hinted at a marriage proposal to one of her daughters, she sees him as an odious, hypocritical and impertinent young man. As soon as he drops hints of his offer, he is immediately transformed for her into a sensible and respectful man. When news of the elopement of Lydia and Wickham reaches her she is full of lamentations and invectives, but when told of the impending marriage, her attitude changes immediately and she is full of ecstasies as violent as her lamentations: "My dear, dear Lydia! ... This is delightful indeed! - She will be married!

1. Jonson, "The Silent Woman."

2. Pride and Prejudice, pp.3-4.

... She will be married at sixteen. How I long to see her! and to see dear Wickham too!"¹ Mrs. Bennet's attitude towards Darcy, Bingley and the Lucases fluctuates in the same way, moved always by her humour. When Bingley continues to stay at Netherfield and concentrates his attentions on Jane Bennet, she sees him as charming and deserving. When he leaves Netherfield he becomes a very undeserving young man in her eyes. She can afford to be very rude to Darcy as long as there is no chance of his marrying any of her daughters, but as soon as she becomes aware of his interest in Elizabeth she is all politeness. Not surprisingly, the news of Collins's proposal of marriage to Charlotte Lucas means only one thing to her: that Lady Lucas will have a daughter married before she does.

In Persuasion, Sir Walter Elliott is obsessed with beauty and rank and is utterly incapable of accepting any other standard of judgment in social relations. When Mr. Shepherd mentions Admiral Croft as a possible tenant of Kellynch Hall, he immediately asks about his rank and appearance. His only reaction upon finding Anne Elliot visiting in Westgate Buildings is that nobody worthy of attention can live there. His philosophy is simple and limited: he who possesses beauty and rank is worth everything; he who has none of these is

1. p.306.

worthless. He is prepared to argue away all Mr. Elliot's past wrongs and in spite of the indignity of seeing him marry another woman instead of his own daughter, he feels reconciled when assured that the late Mrs. Elliot had been a very fine woman with a large fortune. It is this same philosophy which explains his pathetic prostrations in the presence of the very insignificant Lady Dalrymple.

There are various other comic characters created around a single idea. Mr. Woodhouse is a valetudinarian, Lady Bertram is incapable of exertion, and Mrs. Jennings and Miss Bates are enclosed in an unvarying simplicity and innocent volubility.

Jane Austen presents these comic characters as caricatures. She isolates and concentrates on a segment of a character's personality, declining to reveal further aspects which would make him a full character. She very often begins by summing him up in a single definition which is only repeated in varying forms throughout the novels. In Pride and Prejudice she sums up the character of Mrs. Bennet in a single definition at the end of the very first chapter: "She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married."¹ In Mansfield Park she defines Lady Bertram as "a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long

1. p.5.

piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in small concerns by her sister."¹

With certain caricatures however, Jane Austen does more than just sum them up. Sometimes her description of a character's "humour" is so mockingly exaggerated that it is as if she is asking the reader not to take him seriously at all. Her description of Sir Walter Elliot's vanity in Persuasion is an instance of this exaggeration: "He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion."²

At other times she concentrates on certain idiosyncracies of speech which her characters constantly reveal in their day to day intercourse with other characters. Instead of a stock-phrase like Mrs. Micawber's "I will never forsake Mr. Micawber" or Madame Duval's "Ma foi," we have various expressions which compose an idiosyncrasy of syntax and tone and which often contribute to the action. The incessant flow and seemingly confused style of Miss Bates's speeches create her peculiar habit of thought and provide useful plot information. Mary Lascelles has fully accounted for this impression of confusion:

1. Mansfield Park, pp.19-20.

2. p.4.

In fact, the impression of confusion is given by two habits which are so contrived as to counterbalance one another: in the first place, she seldom completes a sentence though she usually carries it far enough to show how it should have been completed (a familiar English idiom) ... In the second place, each sentence flies off at a tangent from the last, but so characteristic are the trains of thought, that when need is every sentence elucidates its curtailed predecessor.- 1

When Emma and Harriet visit the Bates' apartment Miss Bates begins to talk to them about the latest letter from Jane Fairfax:

... Oh! here it is. I was sure it could not be far off; but I had put my huswife upon it, you see, without being aware, and so it was quite hid, but I had it in my hand so very lately that I was almost sure it must be on the table. I was reading it to Mrs. Cole, and since she went away, I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her - a letter from Jane - that she can never hear it often enough; so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only just under my huswife - and since you are so kind as to hear what she says; - but, first of all, I really must, in justice to Jane, apologise for her writing so short a letter - only two pages you see - hardly two - and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half. My mother often wonders that I can make it out so well. She often says when the letter is first opened, 'Well, Hetty, now I think you will be put to it to make out all that chequer-work - don't you, ma'am?' And then I tell her, I am sure she would contrive to make it out herself, if she had nobody to do it for her - every word of it - I am sure she would pore over it till she had made out every word. And, indeed, though my mother's eyes are not so good as they were, she can see amazingly well still, thank God! with the help of spectacles. It is such a blessing! My mother's are really very good indeed. Jane often says, when she is here, 'I am sure, grand-mama, you must have had very strong eyes to see as you do - and so much fine work as you have done too! - I only wish my eyes may last me as well.' 2

She begins her long rambling speech by wondering where she could have put Jane's letter. By a process of quite logical

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1. Lascelles, pp.94-95.
 2. Emma, pp.157-158.

visual associations she thinks back in time to what was happening when she last had it. With Jane's letter in her hands her mind now flies on to Jane's handwriting. She talks at length about how small it is and she leads on from here to the story of her mother's bad sight. Emma's complimentary remarks about Jane's writing interrupts this train of thought but Miss Bates soon begins another. When she says: "I am sure there is nobody's praise that could give us so much pleasure as Miss Woodhouse's"¹ what is foremost in her mind is Emma's compliment and she is naturally concerned that her mother should share the gratification. This concern reminds her of her mother's deafness and she rambles on about it until interrupted by Emma's enquiries about Jane Fairfax's next visit. Miss Bates then begins a long narration of the circumstances surrounding the Campbells' going to Ireland, ending with Jane's impending visit to Highbury. Surprisingly however, she does return to her original point: "... we will turn to her letter, and I am sure she tells her own story a great deal better than I can tell it for her."²

What is absent from Miss Bates's method of thinking is that mental control which enables one to focus one's mind on a particular subject and bring it to a conclusion. It appears essential to her to think back to the past to remind herself of the present and to link corresponding facts or events,

1. p.158.

2. p.162.

W~~h~~ regardless of their immediate relevance to her subject.

But there is nevertheless one kind of control present in her method of thinking. She always comes back to her original point. Consider for instance, her long, unselective and rambling speech to Emma, narrating the sequence of events leading to Jane Fairfax's decision to break her engagement to Frank Churchill:

I was so astonished when she first told me what she had been saying to Mrs. Elton, and when Mrs. Elton at the same moment came congratulating me upon it! It was before tea - stay - no, it could not be before tea, because we were just going to cards - and yet it was before tea, because I remember thinking - Oh! no, now I recollect, now I have it; something happened before tea, but not that. Mr. Elton was called out of the room before tea, old John Abdy's son wanted to speak with him. Poor old John, I have a great regard for him; he was clerk to my poor father twenty-seven years; and now, poor old man, he is bedridden, and very poorly with the rheumatic gout in his joints - I must go and see him today; and so will Jane, I am sure, if she gets out at all. And poor John's son came to talk to Mr. Elton about relief from the parish; he is very well-to-do himself, you know, being headman at the Crown, ostler, and everything of that sort, but still he cannot keep his father without some help; and so, when Mr. Elton came back, he told us what John ostler had been telling him, and then it came out about the chaise having been sent to Randalls to take Mr. Frank Churchill to Richmond. That was what happened before tea. It was after tea that Jane spoke to Mrs. Elton. 1

Here, Miss Bates is trying to make some meaning out of Jane Fairfax's sudden decision to accept Mrs. Elton's offer. As usual, she thinks back to the series of events leading to the offer. She recollects that Mr. Elton was called out of the

1. pp.382-383.

room before tea by old John Abdy's son. But instead of keeping her mind focussed on this series of events she flies off to an account of Old John's problems. She is still alert enough though to return to her main subject. "And poor John's son came to talk to Mr. Elton about relief from the parish." But "relief from the parish" again sends her off her main train of thought into an account of young Abdy's financial position, before she finally returns to the rest of her narration.

Sometimes Jane Austen deliberately isolates Miss Bates's speech in order to make this idiosyncrasy more glaring. At the Crown ball she devotes more than a page to her chatter, and although she sufficiently indicates that other people attempt to respond to her, she cuts off these responses and concentrates on Miss Bates, merely guiding the reader with parenthetical comments like: "as soon as she was within the door," and "eyeing Emma most complacently."¹ At the end of Miss Bates's speech, Jane Austen, without any omniscient comment, proceeds with the rest of her narration, leaving the speech hanging, unresponded to and therefore highly conspicuous.²

Jane Austen also creates the uncomplicated and childlike simplicity of Mr. Woodhouse's speech to show an incapacity for reasoning. Here is Mr. Woodhouse talking about his grandchildren:

1. p.322.

2. This is a technique which Jane Austen occasionally uses for her caricatures. Most of Mary Bennet's and Mrs. Elton's speeches are left hanging. She neither comments on them nor allows other characters to attempt the ordinary give and take of conversation.

Henry is a fine boy, but John is very like his mamma. Henry is the eldest, he was named after me, not after his father. ... Some people are surprised, I believe, that the eldest was not, but Isabella would have him called Henry, which I thought very pretty of her. And he is a very clever boy, indeed. They are all remarkably clever; and they have so many pretty ways. They will come and stand by my chair and say, 'Grand-papa, can you give me a bit of string?' and once Henry asked me for a knife. ...1

His syntax is extremely simple. His mind cannot deal with complex ideas, and like a child he has to move slowly from one idea to the other. He does not attempt to correlate facts or interpret them. In the above extract for instance, he tries to describe his two grandsons but ends up doing very little description. He tries to see Henry in relation to John but fails to make even this simple correlation. First he visualises Henry whom he describes vaguely as a fine boy. Then he pauses for a while before visualising John, whom he describes even more vaguely as "very like his mamma." His unvaried use of adjectives shows the simplicity of his reasoning. He limits himself in this speech to only one complex sentence and to such large and vague adjectives as "fine," "clever" and "pretty."

When Mr. Woodhouse does try to correlate facts or events he merely ends up drawing very large conclusions from extremely minor incidents. Consider this conversation with Mr. Knightley:

1. p.80.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Knightley, to come out at this late hour to call upon us. I am afraid you must have had a shocking walk."

"Not at all, Sir. It is a beautiful, moonlight night; and so mild that I must draw back from your great fire."

"But you must have found it very damp and dirty. I wish you may not catch cold."

"Dirty, Sir! Look at my shoes. Not a speck on them."

"Well! that is quite surprizing, for we have had a vast deal of rain here. It rained dreadfully hard for half an hour, while we were at breakfast. I wanted them to put off the wedding." 1

On those few occasions when Mr. Woodhouse starts an argument, he fails completely to grasp its implications. When Emma points out that his excessive respect for Mrs. Elton as a bride contradicts his general dislike of marriages, he tries to distinguish between his own preferences and common politeness and decorum but these distinctions are obviously too complicated for his simple mind:

No, my dear, you do not understand me. This is a matter of mere common politeness and good-breeding, and has nothing to do with any encouragement to people to marry. 2

In Mansfield Park the placidity and calm languor^u of Lady Bertram's tone show her indolent existence. Her very few speeches show her as incapable of using her faculties even to decide what her own feelings are:

That's well thought of. So I will, Edmund. I will ask Sir Thomas whether I can do without ~~Fanny~~^u 3

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1. p.10.
 2. p.280.
 3. Mansfield Park, p.217.

"What shall I do, Sir Thomas? - Whist and Speculation; which will amuse me most?" 1

Generally, a caricature exists only within the framework of the idea he expresses and does not present the reader with any surprises. The novelist concentrates on a few sections of the personality and refuses to dramatise aspects that might make him a fuller character. Jane Austen does not always work within this fixed framework. She occasionally modifies Jonson's concept of "humours," and her comic characters do not fit into set categories as easily as do the clear-cut figures in some Jonsonian and Restoration comedies. Some of her caricatures are more complexly and sympathetically extended. In Miss Bates and Lady Bertram, both likeable characters, she goes beyond caricature and presents the reader with surprises. Here is how she presents Lady Bertram's reaction to her daughter's elopement:

Lady Bertram did not think deeply, but, guided by Sir Thomas, she thought justly on all important points; and she saw, therefore, in all its enormity, what had happened, and neither endeavoured herself, nor required Fanny to advise her, to think little of guilt and infamy. 2

The first observation about her not thinking deeply is in accordance with the established humour of her indolence, but the next comment about her thinking justly, extends beyond the "humour." If Jane Austen were presenting her strictly according to her "humour" she would not even allow her the

1. p.239.

2. p.449.

exertion of thought but would make her reaction strictly what Sir Thomas dictates and nothing more. Instead, she creates the impression that Lady Bertram genuinely understands the moral problems posed by her daughter's elopement, and this is new, though not inconsistent with the Lady Bertram we know.

Jane Austen also goes beyond caricature when she makes Lady Bertram react naturally and feelingly to the spectacle of Tom Bertram's emaciated form. The change from the elegance and pomposity of her first letter to Fanny ("This distressing intelligence, as you may suppose ... has agitated us exceedingly, and we cannot prevent ourselves from being greatly alarmed, and apprehensive for the poor invalid")¹ to the simplicity and naturalness of her second letter to her ("He is just come, my dear Fanny, and is taken upstairs; and I am so shocked to see him, that I do not know what to do")² indicates her capacity to experience shock. The presentation of this very human side of her as opposed to the previous presentation of her vegetable existence earns some sympathy for Lady Bertram. This sympathy is further heightened by the account of her reaction to Fanny's arrival in Mansfield from Portsmouth:

Fanny had scarcely passed the solemn-looking servants, when Lady Bertram came from the drawing room to meet her; came with no indolent step; and, falling on her neck, said "Dear Fanny! Now I shall be comfortable." ³

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1. p.426.
 2. p.427.
 3. p.447.

If Lady Bertram were here functioning as a caricature she would very rightly be seated on her sofa with "pug" beside her, unaware of and utterly unruffled by Fanny's arrival.

The expansion which takes place in Miss Bates is a little different. Unlike Lady Bertram's, which takes place after the humour has been established, it starts earlier. Jane Austen invariably reveals areas of Miss Bates's personality which transcend mere caricature. She exaggerates her boundless good humour for comic purposes, but always shows that amidst all the incessant flow of her speeches, she is genuinely and therefore admirably good-humoured. Consider, for instance, the guilelessness and warmth of her comments about people:

Now, here will be Mrs. Elton and Miss Hawkins; and there are the Coles, such very good people; and the Perrys - I suppose there never was a happier or a better couple than Mr. and Mrs. Perry. I say, Sir ... I always say, we are quite blessed in our neighbours. 1

Or her unsuspecting gratitude to Mrs. Elton's condescending interest in Jane Fairfax:

Yes, our good Mrs. Elton. The most indefatigable, true friend. She would not take a denial. She would not let Jane say 'No' ... 2

The warmth of Miss Bates's disposition is endearing. One has only to hear her talk about her mother or Jane to feel that she genuinely cares about them. Having spent almost all her life-time caring for her mother, it is much to Miss Bates's

1. Emma, p.175.

2. p.380.

credit that she can talk about her without any grumbling or bitterness:

My mother's deafness is very trifling you see - just nothing at all. By only raising my voice, and saying anything two or three times over, she is sure to hear; but then she is used to my voice. 1

Miss Bates is also, surprisingly, most honest about her shortcomings and most ready to admit them. She is not like Mrs. Elton who refuses throughout to see her real self, or like Emma who constantly deludes herself. In the following passage for instance, she shows a degree of self-knowledge which one sometimes wishes Mrs. Elton or Emma would possess. Talking incoherently about having fancied Mr. Elton might marry Emma, she admits her own incapacity to make discoveries:

... I had always rather fancied it would be some young lady hereabouts; not that I ever - Mrs. Cole once whispered to me - but I immediately said, "No, Mr. Elton is a most worthy young man - but - ' In short, I do not think I am particularly quick at those sort of discoveries. I do not pretend to it. What is before me, I see. 2

At Box Hill she shows a similar self-knowledge when she admits her intellectual inferiority. Amidst the boredom and disunity of the party, Emma and Frank Churchill take refuge in frivolous jesting:

"Ladies and gentlemen," [says Frank Churchill,] "I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that she waves her right of knowing exactly what you may all be thinking of, and only requires something very entertaining from

1. p.158.
2. p.,76.

each of you, in a general way. Here are seven of you, besides myself ... and she only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated - or three things moderately clever - or three things very dull indeed, and she engages to laugh heartily at them all."

"Oh! very well," exclaimed Miss Bates, "then I need not be uneasy. 'Three things very dull indeed.' That will just do for me, you know, I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I? ... Do not you all think I shall?"

Emma could not resist. "Ah! Ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me - but you will be limited as to number - only three at once." 1

Miss Bates shows self-knowledge and some humour by making a joke against herself, and though in doing so she exposes herself to Emma's attack she does not in fact expect it. Conscious that she is accepted in her society in spite of her limitations, she looks round with the most good-humoured dependence on everybody's assent as she talks. Emma's attack is therefore particularly gratuitous and nasty. She makes an insensitive mistake by regarding Miss Bates merely as a figure of fun:

Nay, how could I help saying what I did? [she explains to Mr. Knightley] Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I daresay she did not understand me. 2

But Jane Austen makes it clear that Miss Bates is just as vulnerable as any other character and can feel hurt and mortified:

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1. p.370.
 2. p.374.

Ah! - well - to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, /Miss Bates turns to Mr. Knightley/ and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend. 1

In fact by accepting blame for Emma's insolence Miss Bates here appears morally superior to Emma.

In his essay on Emma D.W. Harding points out that Miss Bates is sometimes even given the moral advantage in a social situation, to the discomfiture of those, including the reader, who have felt comfortably superior to her. He gives as an example Miss Bates's moral courage in shouldering responsibility for the leakage of the story Mr. Perry had confided in her, and he comments that this admission of weakness represents "an intense irruption of human relevance in a figure we had been invited to think of as far out caricature," a means by which Jane Austen reminds herself and us of the "limited validity of ridicule."²

The Complex Comic Characters

The comic characters I have been discussing have two things in common. They are all presented as minor characters and they are consistently comic. There is another important group of comic characters who become comic at certain points when they make mistakes about themselves and about the world.

1. p.371.

2. D.W. Harding, "Character and Caricature in Jane Austen," Critical Essays on Jane Austen, ed. B.C. Southam (London, 1968) p.105.

Unlike the caricatures and the other minor characters who are easily seen through, they are complex, intricate characters and are sufficiently self-aware to deserve to be taken seriously. Because of their self-awareness they are also capable of recognising their mistakes and profiting from them. They are the most important illustrations of Jane Austen's comedy. For although (as I have previously argued) she is amused by and often tolerant of the minor comic characters, it is still a fact that they have not grown to a stature significantly measurable by her moral law and do not possess the complexities necessary for internal comedy. It is the complex character that Jane Austen finds the central subject for comedy.

The major comic characters are those who by their sanity, reasonableness and capacity to learn, become the yardsticks by which the grotesqueness of the minor comic characters is measured. Catherine Morland is the most comic of the heroines. Her gullibility, naiveté and confusion of fiction and reality are criticised and "cured" through comedy. Her author's attitude towards her is critical, but also lenient and affectionate.

The comic delineation begins in Bath as Catherine meets new people and encounters new situations. Jane Austen makes use of an ironic commentator who openly criticises and mocks her, and it is through the various dialogues with Henry Tilney,

this commentator, that Catherine's absurdities are dramatised. In their discussion of novels and novel reading, Henry Tilney maintains an ambiguous position. While deliberately appearing to support Catherine's enthusiasm about Gothic novels he points out the absurd indulgences of Gothic novel readers. His description of his own behaviour as a novel reader is ironic in its exaggeration:

The mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; - I remember finishing it in two days - my hair standing on end the whole time.

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Here was I, in my eagerness to get on, refusing to wait only five minutes for my sister; breaking the promise I had made of reading it aloud, and keeping her in suspense at a most interesting part, by running away with the volume, which, you are to observe, was her own, particularly her own. I am proud when I reflect on it, and I think it must establish me in your good opinion. 1

His response to Udolpho is exaggerated but real, and his tone in the second passage is mocking, but based presumably on a genuine but detached pleasure. His spirited defence of his susceptibility and his conviction that it would establish him in Catherine's good opinion is an amusingly mild criticism of the kind of sensibility Catherine has cultivated.

Jane Austen does not rely only on Henry Tilney to ridicule Catherine. Sometimes, by merely dramatising her exchanges

1. Northanger Abbey, pp.106-107.

with Isabella Thorpe, she shows the extent to which she is gulled. In the following passage for instance, Catherine is impressed and charmed by Isabella's false sentiments as she talks effusively on disinterested love:

Oh! my sweet Catherine, in your* generous heart I know it would signify nothing; but we must not expect such disinterestedness in many. As for myself, I am sure I only wish our situations were reversed. Had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice. 1

The falseness of this declaration, suggested in its metaphors and its exaggerations, is apparent to the reader, but Catherine is impressed and charmed. In an omniscient account, Jane Austen pretends to adopt and favour her point of view while ironically suggesting its opposite:

This charming sentiment, recommended as much by sense as novelty, gave Catherine a most pleasant remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance; and she thought her friend never looked more lovely than in uttering the grand idea. 2

Such sentiments as Isabella's, Jane Austen suggests, can be charming only in the unreal world of the sentimental novel. Catherine is impressed because she cannot distinguish between the real Isabella (who is false) and the romantic heroine.

When after her disappointment with James Morland's fortune Isabella conveniently shifts from romantic notions to practical judgments, Catherine is still taken in. Consider Isabella's crafty manoeuvres and Catherine's credulity in the following conversation:

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1. p.119.
 2. p.119.

"Since that is the case, I am sure I shall not tease you any further. John desired me to speak to you on the subject, and therefore I have. But I confess, as soon as I read his letter, I thought it a very foolish, imprudent business, and not likely to promote the good of either; for what were you to live upon, supposing you came together? You have both of you something to be sure, but it is not a trifle that will support a family now-a-days; and after all that romancers may say, there is no doing without money. I only wonder John could think of it; he could not have received my last."

"You do*acquit me then of any thing wrong? - You are convinced that I never meant to deceive your brother, never suspected him of liking me till this moment?"

"Oh! as to that," answered Isabella laughingly, I do not pretend to determine what your thoughts and designs in time past may have been. All that is best known to yourself. A little harmless flirtation or so will occur, and one is often drawn on to give more encouragement than one wishes to stand by. But you may be assured that I am the last person in the world to judge you severely. All those things should be allowed for in youth and high spirits. What one means one day, you know, one may not mean the next. Circumstances change, opinions alter."

"But my opinion of your brother never did alter; it was always the same. You are describing what never happened."

"My dearest Catherine," continued the other without at all listening to her, I would not for all the world be the means of hurrying you into an engagement before you knew what you were about. I do not think anything would justify me in wishing you to sacrifice all your happiness merely to oblige my brother, because he is my brother ..."¹

Isabella is obviously thinking of herself though pretending to be advising Catherine; she is trying to justify her inconsistency and forestall future accusations. She exploits

1. pp.145-146.

Catherine's moral consciousness: on the pretext of defending what she craftily calls Catherine's "designs" and "harmless flirtation," she generalises in an impersonal tone to support her own personal morality. Catherine detects that Isabella's descriptions are imaginary, but she is too unsuspecting and naive to probe her intentions and so does not even recognise the inconsistency of Isabella's new position.

When the action of the novel shifts to Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen relies more on the language of her narration to expose and ridicule Catherine's "fevered imagination." Catherine's adventure in Northanger Abbey centres on two main events, discovering a roll of paper in a drawer, and finding out the true story of Mrs. Tilney's death. The first is presented in high comedy. The narrative language is exaggerated, the description of feeling highly detailed and intense, and the tone mockingly solemn:

... her feelings at that moment were indescribable. Her heart fluttered, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale. She seized, with an unsteady hand, the precious manuscript, for half a glance sufficed to ascertain written characters; and while she acknowledged with awful sensations this striking exemplification of what Henry had foretold, resolved instantly to peruse every line before she attempted rest. 1

The very curtains of her bed seemed at one moment in motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter. Hollow murmurs seemed to creep along the gallery, and

1. p.169.

more than once her blood was chilled by the sound of distant moans. Hour after hour passed away, and the wearied Catherine had heard three proclaimed by all the clocks in the house, before the tempest subsided, or she unknowingly fell fast asleep. 1

In the first passage the language reinforces the effect of anti-climax in action. After those tense and heightened descriptions we do not expect Catherine's discovery to be merely an ordinary laundry list. Her terror in the second passage may be real enough but it is shown as merely provoked by a fictional reality. Jane Austen's descriptions mockingly imitate the Gothic style.² Later, as she describes Catherine's fears and anxiety about being suddenly turned out of Northanger Abbey her language is markedly different:

Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high, and often produced strange and sudden noises throughout the house, she heard it all as she lay awake, hour after hour, without curiosity or terror. 3

Catherine's experience here is more immediate and her feelings more moderate. Her anxiety and fear, provoked by a real-life situation, are natural emotions. Correspondingly the descriptive language here is simpler, milder and more sincere.

1. p.171.

2. The intense description of feeling and the solemn tone remind us of some descriptive passages in Mrs. Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho.

3. p.227.

Jane Austen's attitude towards Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility is more censorious. At the beginning of the novel she is merely engaged in ridiculing her and light-heartedly pointing the difference between her romantic notions and the reality around her. Her description of Marianne's extreme sensibility when leaving Norland for Barton Park is pure burlesque:

... when shall I cease to regret you! when learn to feel a home else where! Oh! happy house, could you know how I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more! - And you, ye well-known trees! - but you will continue the same. - No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer! No; you will continue the same; unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion, and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade! 1

Jane Austen parodies the sentimental heroine's stock response to familiar places and landscape, which Marianne has adopted and she mocks the kind of sensibility which is rather excessive for the situation it describes.

Later she uses Marianne's judgment of Edward Ferrars as a means of mild criticism. She shows that while Marianne is capable of recognising solid worth in Edward Ferrars she tends in general to attach great importance to details of appearance and feeling. This is how Marianne sees Edward:

1. Sense and Sensibility, p.27.

Edward is very amiable, and I love him tenderly. But yet - he is not the kind of young man - there is a something wanting - his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister. His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence. 1

This judgment is based on Marianne's own assumptions and it is questionable. Her claim that "spirit" and "fire" in a man's eyes indicate virtue and intelligence is only a half-truth. A man's intelligence may gleam in his eyes but what of his virtue? This question is answered, of course, by Willoughby, whose satisfactory "spirit" and "fire" do not "announce virtue and intelligence."

As Marianne gets more uncompromising in her stand for sensibility and as she begins to reject social decorum and cause her mother and sister real pain, Jane Austen gets more strongly censorious in her delineation. She discards her tone of lighthearted banter and exhibits the folly and selfishness of Marianne's excessive sensibility. When for instance, Marianne, in judging Colonel Brandon, contemptuously asserts "that he has neither genius, taste nor spirit. That his understanding has no brilliancy, his feelings no ardour, and his voice no expression,"² we are no longer merely asked to laugh at the indulgences of sensibility but to make a strongly critical judgment which is guided by Elinor's reaction:

1. p.17.

2. p.51.

"You decide on his imperfections so much in the mass," replied Elinor, "and so much on the strength of your own imagination, that the commendation I am able to give of him is comparatively cold and insipid. I can only pronounce him to be a sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and I believe possessing an amiable heart. 1

In a world like Jane Austen's where concepts are fixed and values are secure, it is dangerous and wrong for a character to judge from such subjective standards as Marianne's, and Elinor's own judgment of Colonel Brandon with its emphasis on more general and conceptual terms like sensible, amiable and well-bred, brings out the deficiencies of Marianne's standards.

When on another occasion Marianne's sensibility leads to a breach of decorum, a similar moral condemnation is demanded. In the argument between the sisters after Marianne has been shown round Willoughby's house in Mrs. Smith's presence, her standards are shown to be highly individual:

... if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction, I could have had no pleasure. 2

This argument is sharply rejected by Elinor: "the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety."³

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1. p.51.
 2. p.68.
 3. p.68.

The comic portrayal of Emma Woodhouse is slightly different. Emma's faults are not only serious ones but threaten to endanger other people. Her delusions,¹ unlike Marianne's, are made the centre of the novel. There is no Elinor whose actions can be continually juxtaposed with hers, and Jane Austen has to devise a way to allow the reader to laugh and sympathise at the same time. She solves the problem by making use of Emma's consciousness as a central point of view, presenting events mainly through her eyes, while ironically indicating what Wayne Booth² calls her "unreliability." It is by means of these ironic revelations of unreliability that Jane Austen is able to provide an exact assessment of situations and indicate the extent of Emma's self-deception. Let us look at one of these numerous occasions when Emma's judgment of a particular situation is presented and evaluated. This is Emma evaluating Mr. Elton as a lover:

1. Like Marianne Dashwood, Emma is intelligent and perceptive enough to see through most of the other characters in her world but she is self-reliant and deluded. Spurred on by the marriage of her governess, which she believes she has arranged, she aspires to a god-like role in believing she can take on Harriet Smith and make her marry Mr. Elton or Frank Churchill, but Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma herself destroys her illusions, though only temporarily. For even after the humiliating discovery of Mr. Elton's real intentions, Emma is still confident in her powers of discernment. She believes, for instance, that she has all the clues to Jane Fairfax's real character and makes up an ingenious explanation for the pianoforté that some one has sent to her. But she misses the whole point of the story behind the pianoforté and instead gives Frank Churchill the chance to make use of her in covering up his relationship with Jane Fairfax.

2. Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), pp. 249-256.

"This man is almost too gallant to be in love," thought Emma. "I should say so, but that I suppose there may be a hundred different ways of being in love. He is an excellent young man, and will suit Harriet exactly; it will be an 'Exactly so,' as he says himself; but he does sigh and languish, and study for compliments rather more than I could endure as a principal. I come in for a pretty good share as a second. But it is his gratitude on Harriet's account. 1

Without a single omniscient comment, Jane Austen dramatises the confusion in Emma's mind. She shows her fluctuations, first, from a proper estimate of the situation: "this man is almost too gallant to be in love," next towards a wilful twisting of facts: "he is an excellent young man," and finally to a hollow generalisation which she clearly does not believe in: "there may be a hundred different ways of being in love." Emma's mind fluctuates in this fashion until she has persuaded herself that Elton is really in love with Harriet.

At times Jane Austen shows the extent of Emma's self-deception by differentiating between what she says when she thinks she knows herself, and what she feels when she really does. At the beginning of the novel Emma, self-deceived, boasts of her unlimited inner resources and her independence from love and marriage:

If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than at one and twenty. Woman's usual occupations of eye and hand and mind will be as open

1. Emma, p.49.

to me then as they are now; or with no important variation. If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet work. 1

At the end of the novel, more acquainted with herself and therefore more sincere, she admits her need for love and companionship:

The child to be born at Randall's must be a tie there even dearer than herself; and Mrs. Weston's heart and time would be occupied by it. They should lose her; and, probably, in great measure, her husband also. - Frank Churchill would return among them no more; and Miss Fairfax, it was reasonable to suppose, would soon cease to belong to Highbury. They would be married, and settled at or near Enscombe. All that were good would be withdrawn; and if to these losses the loss of Donwell were to be added, what could remain of rational or cheerful society within their reach? Mr. Knightley to be no longer coming there for his evening comfort! - No longer walking in at all hours, as if ever willing to change his own home for theirs! How was it to be endured? 2

In the first passage, "If I know myself," is ironic. Emma does not know herself. Even at twenty-one she has not done any sustained reading or painting, and we cannot picture her at forty, sitting calmly down and doing carpet work. Her happiness has so far depended more on her relationship with her father and her friends (Mr. Knightley in particular) than on her so-called independent resources. Her speech is merely exhibitionist. Like most of Mrs. Norris's speeches it has too many pronouns of the first person singular and suggests a similar egocentricity. The exhibitionism of the first passage

1. pp.85-86.

2. p.422.

is, however, completely subdued in the second passage. The language is different. The first person has disappeared and has been replaced by the third person. Emma has grown up. She is no longer thinking of herself as an independent person feeding on her own resources and creating her own happiness. She is thinking of other people and discovering how much their existence contribute to hers.

When Emma takes a seemingly objective look at the events leading to Mr. Elton's proposal to her, the language is so manipulated that we are able to assess the situation ourselves and to detect exactly where she deceives herself:

The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. - It was a wretched business, indeed! - Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for! - Such a development of everything most unwelcome! - Such a blow for Harriet - That was the worst of all. Every part of it brought pain and humiliation, of some sort or other; but, compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light; and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken - more in error - more disgraced by misjudgment, than she actually was, could the effects of her blunder have been confined to herself.

"If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have born anything. He might have doubled his presumption to me - But poor Harriet!" How she could have been so deceived! - He protested that he had never thought seriously of Harriet - never! She looked back as well as she could; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it. His manners, however, must have been unmarked, wavering, dubious, or she could not have been so misled.

The picture! - How eager he had been about the picture! - And the charade! - and an hundred other circumstances; - how clearly they had seemed to point at Harriet! To be sure, the charade, with its 'ready wit' - but then, the "soft eyes" - in fact, it suited neither; it was a jumble without taste or truth. Who could have seen through such thick-headed nonsense?

Certainly she had often, especially of late, thought his manners to herself unnecessarily gallant; but it had passed as his way, as a mere error of judgment, of knowledge, of taste, as one proof, among others that he had not always lived in the best society, that with all the gentleness of his address, true elegance was sometimes wanting; but, till this very day, she had never, for an instant, suspected it to mean anything but grateful respect to her as Harriet's friend.

To Mr. John Knightley was she indebted for her first idea on the subject, for the first start of its possibility. There was no denying that those brothers had penetration. She remembered what Mr. Knightley had once said to her about Mr. Elton, the caution he had given, the conviction he had professed that Mr. Elton would never marry indiscreetly; and blushed to think how much truer a knowledge of his character had been there shown than any she had reached herself. It was dreadfully mortifying; but Mr. Elton was proving himself, in many respects, the very reverse of what she had meant and believed him-- proud, assuming, conceited; very full of his own claims, and little concerned about the feelings of others.

Contrary to the usual course of things, Mr. Elton's wanting to pay his addresses to her had sunk him in her opinion. His professions and his proposals did him no service. She thought nothing of his attachment, and was insulted by his hopes. He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love; but she was perfectly easy as to his not suffering any disappointment that need be cared for. There had been no real affection either in his language or manners. Sighs and fine words had been given in abundance; but she would hardly devise any set of expressions, or fancy any tone of voice, less allied with real love. She need not trouble herself to pity

him. He only wanted to aggrandise and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody-else with twenty, or with ten.

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The first error and the worst lay at her door. 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. She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more.

"Here have I," said she, "actually talked poor Harriet into being very much attached to this man. She might never have thought of him but for me; and certainly never would have thought of him with hope, if I had not assured her of his attachment, for she is as modest and humble as I used to think him. Oh! that I had been satisfied with persuading her not to accept young Martin. There I was quite right. That was well done of me; but there I should have stopped, and left the rest to time and chance. I was introducing her into good company, and giving her the opportunity of pleasing some one worth having; I ought not to have attempted more. But now, poor girl, her peace is cut up for some time. I have been but half a friend to her! and if she were not* to feel this disappointment so very much, I am sure I have not an idea of anybody else who would be at all desirable for her; William Cox - Oh! no, I could not endure William Cox - a pert young lawyer.

She stopt to blush and laugh at her own relapse, and then resumed a more serious, more dispiriting cogitation upon what had been, and might be, and must be. The distressing explanation she had to make to Harriet, and all that poor Harriet would be suffering, with the awkwardness of future meetings, the difficulties of continuing or discontinuing the acquaintance, of subduing feelings, concealing resentment and avoiding eclat, were enough to occupy her in most unmirthful reflections some time longer, and she went to bed at last with nothing settled but the conviction of her having blundered most dreadfully. 1

1. pp.134-137.

It does not take us long to realise that Emma's misery is not felt deeply enough. Her rather theatrical exclamations in the first paragraph, "such an overthrow of everything ... such a development of everything, such a blow for Harriet" are too cosy. She does not sound contrite enough: "Every part of it brought pain and humiliation of some sort or other." The vagueness and indifference of "some sort or other" acts against the generality and exaggeration of "every part" to show that Emma is merely playing at being miserable. Although she accuses herself and appears to accept all the blame for the evil to Harriet, her very language shows her not entirely convinced of her error: "... and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken - more in error - more disgraced by misjudgment than she actually was, could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself." These resolutions are too handsomely phrased to be sincere, and "gladly" is rather suspicious sounding. Since when has Emma gladly submitted to being wrong? In fact the words "more mistaken - more in error - more disgraced by misjudgment than she actually was" conceal a conviction that she was not so entirely wrong.

Emma's next attempt at self-analysis in the third paragraph is more natural and sincere. "How she could have been so deceived. He protested that he had never thought seriously of Harriet - never!" But it stops short at the crucial point:

"she looked back as well as she could, but it was all confusion." The trouble is she does not probe deep enough. A little honest self-searching would have told her a lot. But this is as far as Emma is prepared to go. Her next sentence shows her losing interest in self-analysis: "She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it" and not surprisingly, she assumes a very defensive attitude: "His manners, however, must have been unmarked, wavering, dubious, or she could not have been so misled."

In the fourth paragraph, Emma recollects Mr. Knightley's constant warnings and admits that he had shown a truer knowledge of Mr. Elton than she had ever reached. She professes herself "dreadfully mortified" but her reaction shows not mortification but anger; anger not at herself but at Mr. Elton: "He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love. ..."

After this outburst Emma makes another attempt at self-criticism: "The first error, and the worst, lay at her door ..." but her contrition and her resolution to do better are deliberately couched to raise our suspicion: "She was quite concerned and ashamed and resolved to do such things no more." The cosy and limiting impression created by "quite" comments on the extent of Emma's concern, and her almost instinctive return to matchmaking at once questions the firmness of her resolution "to do such things no more."

On some occasions, Emma's delusions are incorporated in the novel's dramatic ironies. Some of her dialogues with Frank Churchill are ironic precisely because she is ignorant of facts and circumstances which he (and the reader) know. Her conversation with him at the Coles's dinner party begins a series of ironies which show how deceived she is about Frank and about Jane Fairfax. The basis of her suspicions about Jane Fairfax is sound enough: "I am sure there must be a particular cause for her choosing to come to Highbury."¹ It is only when she attempts to make up her own explanation that she blunders. As she tries to explain the circumstances surrounding Jane Fairfax's pianoforté, she unknowingly gives Frank Churchill a chance to exploit her. His speech to Emma declaring himself convinced by her reasoning is ironic:

Indeed you injure me if you suppose me unconvinced. Your reasonings carry my judgment along with them entirely. At first, while I supposed you satisfied that Colonel Campbell was the giver, I saw it only as paternal kindness, and thought it the most natural thing in the world. But when you mentioned Mrs. Dixon, I felt how much more probable that it should be the tribute of warm female friendship. And now I can see it in no other light than as an offering of love. 2

Even without a second reading of Emma, the ironic undertones in Frank's speech can be detected. His reference to Emma's "reasonings," for instance, is disingenuous, for Emma's romantic and illogical conclusions are based on scanty and

1. p.217.

2. pp.218-219.

second-hand evidence:

"And then, he saved her life. Did you ever hear of that? - A water party; and by some accident she was falling overboard. He caught her."

"He did. I was there - one of the party" [replies Frank Churchill]

"Were you really? - Well! But you observed nothing of course, for it seems to be a new idea to you. - If I had been there, I think I should have made some discoveries."

"I dare say you would; but I, simple I, saw nothing but the fact, that Miss Fairfax was nearly dashed from the vessel, and that Mr. Dixon caught her - It was the work of a moment." 1

Frank Churchill's own first-hand account of the incident should be more convincing to the reader. His statement: "Your reasonings carry my judgment along with them entirely" is only meant to deceive Emma. What he really thinks is that her guesses suit his convenience entirely.

From now on, Emma's exchanges with Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax assume an ambiguous character. The comedy is all at Emma's expense. The reader senses a contradiction between what she says and what she would have said if she knew the facts of the situation. Let us take the scene in the Bates' sitting room after Miss Bates has persuaded Emma and Harriet to come and give their opinion of Jane's new pianoforte. As Jane sits down to play, Emma interprets her nervousness: "She had not yet possessed the instrument long

1. pp.217-218.

enough to touch it without emotion; she must reason herself into the power of performance."¹ Emma's observation and general surmise are shrewd but she is wrong in thinking that Jane's nervousness has something to do with Mr. Dixon. On a second reading, the reader knows that she is wide of the mark. Her interpretation of Jane Fairfax's smile as she is teased by Frank Churchill is also at variance with the real facts of the situation:

Emma wished he would be less pointed, yet could not help being amused; and when on glancing her eye towards Jane Fairfax she caught the remains of a smile, when she saw that with all the deep blush of consciousness, there had been a smile of secret delight, she had less scruple in the amusement, and much less compunction with respects to her. - This amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings. 2

Elizabeth Bennet is the most elusive of all Jane Austen's comic heroines. The reader can overlook the ambiguity with which she is presented and assume that she reliably represents Jane Austen's viewpoint. She is undoubtedly an attractive character and is intelligent and perceptive enough to see through all the comic characters around her. In spite of her attachment to her sister, Jane, she is nevertheless aware of her simplicity and naivete. She sees through the conceit and condescension of the Bingley sisters and aims herself against their haughtiness, while it takes Jane a long period of suffering and anxiety to recognise their intrigues. For all her perception

1. pp.240

2. p.243

Elizabeth is, however, partially deceived about Darcy and taken in by Wickham's charm. These faults of judgment are not so immediately apparent since Wickham's charm is easily recognisable and Darcy is himself ambiguously presented.

Irony is employed from the very beginning of Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy. Let us look, for instance, at the scene of Darcy's first appearance at the Longbourn assembly ball, where, as Marvin Mudrick says, "he initiates Elizabeth's prejudice by speaking with a simple vulgarity indistinguishable from his aunt's, and in a voice loud enough to be overheard by the object of his contempt."¹ Answering Bingley, who has just asked him to dance with Elizabeth, Darcy says:

"Which do you mean?" and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me,"* and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men." ²

Jane Austen obviously wants Darcy's behaviour to appear in an unfavourable light. The description is omniscient and the adjective "coldly" implies an authorial comment on his behaviour. But it is not at all clear that she means to give the impression (as Mudrick believes) that he is deliberately speaking in a voice loud enough to be overheard by Elizabeth. There is indeed a possibility that Darcy might not have meant his comment to be overheard by Elizabeth. He was after all talking

1. Mudrick, p.118.

2. Pride and Prejudice, pp.11-12.

in confidence to his best friend, and to one's best friends one can afford to be open and unguarded. But at this stage, this is only a minor ambiguity.

From now on, the reader sees that while Darcy is becoming attracted by Elizabeth and behaving more gallantly, Elizabeth's first opinion of him remains unshaken. Unlike the reader, she is not put in a position to understand what is happening to Darcy, and her prejudice and aggression are exposed:

Mr. Darcy with grave propriety requested to be allowed the honour of her hand; but in vain. Elizabeth was determined; nor did Sir William at all shake her purpose by his attempt at persuasion.

"You excel so much in the dance, Miss Eliza, that it is cruel to deny me the happiness of seeing you; and though this gentleman dislikes the amusement in general, he can have no objection, I am sure, to oblige us for one half hour."

"Mr. Darcy is all politeness," said Elizabeth, smiling.

"He is indeed - but considering the inducement. . . ."

Elizabeth looked archly, and turned away. Her resistance had not injured her with the gentleman, and he was thinking of her with some complacency. . . . 1

The important point here is the interpretation which the reader gives to the words "Mr. Darcy with grave propriety." Elizabeth interprets Darcy's "grave propriety" as mere politeness and assumes that he is only asking her to oblige Sir William. When she says "Mr. Darcy is all politeness" she is trying to show him that she understands him and refuses to be humoured. But to the neutral reader "grave propriety" can simply mean a proper decorum.

In chapter eleven, Darcy and the Bingley sisters engage in a discussion on "vanity" and "pride:"

"It has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses, which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule."

"Such as vanity and pride." [Elizabeth replies with obvious design. (words mine)]

"Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride - where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation."

Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile.¹

The important detail is Elizabeth's smile. It is a very smug smile, expressing the confident assumption that she knows Darcy better than he knows himself. To the reader Darcy's remark seems slightly pompous but perfectly normal.

On some occasions Elizabeth's prejudice is indicated by an ambiguous presentation of her point of view. Take for instance, her account of the meeting between Mr. Collins and Darcy. Mr. Collins, without previous introduction, has insisted on introducing himself to Darcy. Elizabeth, fearing the worst, is eagerly watching Darcy's reception of his advances. She cannot hear a word of what Collins is saying to him yet she feels as if she can and is irritated to see Collins expose himself to Darcy. Elizabeth sees the incident like this: Darcy replies to Collins with an air of distant civility, his contempt seems to increase as Collins goes on talking, and eventually Darcy makes a slight bow and moves away. Mr. Collins'

1. p.57.

account of the meeting is different: he has not been dissatisfied with his reception, Darcy has seemed much pleased with the attention, has answered him with the utmost civility and has paid him the compliment of saying that he was so well convinced of Lady Catherine's discernment as to be certain she could never bestow a favour unworthily. The question here is: whose point of view is correct? Obviously, Collins' own stupidity and lack of perception can vouch for his inability to distinguish contempt from compliment. But there is no explicit indication of such a possibility here; only an ambiguous suggestion that Elizabeth has merely imagined what she had expected Darcy to say. Between Elizabeth's prejudice and Collins's psychopathic blindness may lie the "facts" that we cannot see. But we can infer them, discounting the unreliable views of Elizabeth and Mr. Collins.

At Mrs. Phillips' party in Meryton, Elizabeth and Wickham engage in a long conversation about Darcy, and Jane Austen points out the readiness with which Elizabeth condemns Darcy: "I have spent four days in the same house with him, and I think him very disagreeable."¹ Here the quiet irony rises from the contrast between the length of her acquaintance and the finality of her accusation. The wider irony is that it takes her more than four days to get to know Darcy - almost the whole length of the novel. Even the brilliant stroke of

1. p.77.

Wickham's false hint of the possibility of unfairness in an estimation of Darcy - "I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge"¹ does not deter Elizabeth:

Upon my word, I say no more here^x than I might say in any house in the neighbourhood, except Netherfield. He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody is disgusted with his pride. You will not find him more favourably spoken of by any one. 2

The revelation is disconcerting, and Elizabeth here sounds almost like Mrs. Bennet.

When finally Elizabeth learns the whole of Wickham's story her reaction is significant:

"I want to know," said she, with a countenance no less smiling than her sister's, "what you have learnt about Mr. Wickham. But perhaps you have been too pleasantly engaged to think of any third person; in which case you may be sure of my pardon."

"No," replied Jane, "I have not forgotten him; but I have nothing satisfactory to tell you. Mr. Bingley does not know the whole of his history, and is quite ignorant of the circumstances which have principally offended Mr. Darcy; but he will vouch for the good conduct, the probity and honour of his friend, and is perfectly convinced that Mr. Wickham has deserved much less attention from Mr. Darcy than he has received; and I am sorry to say that by his account as well as his sister's, Mr. Wickham is by no means a respectable young man. I am afraid he has been very imprudent, and has deserved to lose Mr. Darcy's regard."

"Mr. Bingley does not know Mr. Wickham himself?"

"No; he never saw him till the other morning at Meryton."

"This account then is what he has received from Mr. Darcy. I am perfectly satisfied. But what does he say of the living?"

1. p.77.
2. pp.77-78.

"He does not exactly recollect the circumstances, though he has heard them from Mr. Darcy more than once, but he believes that it was left to him conditionally*only."

"I have not a doubt of Mr. Bingley's sincerity," said Elizabeth warmly; "but you must excuse my not being convinced by assurances only. Mr. Bingley's defence of his friend was a very able one I dare say, but since he is unacquainted with several parts of the story, and has learnt the rest from that friend himself, I shall venture still to think of both gentlemen as I did before." 1

The situation is complicated by circumstances likely to prevent our recognition of the irony directed at Elizabeth. For instance, Bingley's uncritical regard for Darcy's understanding and conduct might prejudice us, and our knowledge that the account of Wickham's character has been given by both Bingley and his sister might further incense us, especially when we remember Caroline's earlier insolence to Elizabeth. But Elizabeth's grounds for not believing Bingley are inconsistent and her charges apply equally to herself. Like Bingley, she is herself unacquainted with several parts of the Wickham-Darcy story; like him, she has been merely convinced by assurances, and worse still, from someone with whom she is only slightly acquainted, and while Elizabeth is feeling superior to Jane and Bingley, the reader should, I suggest, be feeling equally superior to her.

1. pp.95-96.

Jane Austen's comedy aims at delighting the reader by showing the heroine's faults as well as her movement towards self-knowledge. The undeception of Elizabeth Bennet is systematically dramatised through a series of incidents. It begins with an account of her biased reading of Darcy's letter. She does not read the letter well enough and her conclusions, too hastily drawn, are merely determined by her emotions. Her attempt at self-analysis only begins with a second reading of Darcy's letter. This time she makes a greater effort to judge objectively. She reads, and re-reads, with the closest attention and has to give way to every variety of thought, to reconsider events and to determine probability. It is only then that she begins to see people and events in true perspective:

She was now* struck with the impropriety of [Wickham's] communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before. She saw the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had done, and the inconsistency of his professions with his conduct. 1

The process of judgment, Jane Austen suggests, is not as easy and straightforward as Elizabeth has assumed, and a sound judgment can only be arrived at after careful observation and analysis. Elizabeth herself accepts the truth of this when she accuses herself: "Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd." This discovery is humiliating for Elizabeth

1. p.207.

but her very capacity for self-knowledge sets her apart from all the minor comic characters, who do not have the self-awareness to recognise or let alone accept their faults.

Emma Woodhouse's final awakening comes with similar humiliating experiences, the most traumatic being her dramatic conversation with Harriet after learning of Jane Fairfax's engagement to Frank Churchill. Expecting Harriet to be disappointed at the news, she is surprised at her reaction:

"Well, Miss Woodhouse!" cried Harriet, coming eagerly into the room - "is not this the oddest news that ever was?"

"What news do you mean?" replied Emma, unable to guess, by look or voice, whether Harriet could indeed have received any hint.

"About Jane Fairfax. Did you ever hear anything so strange? Oh! - you need not be afraid of owning it to me, for Mr. Weston has told me himself. I met him just now. He told me it was to be a great secret; and, therefore, I should not think of mentioning it to anybody but you, but he said you knew it."

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It was, indeed, so odd; Harriet's behaviour was so extremely odd, that Emma did not know how to understand it. Her character appeared absolutely changed. She seemed to propose showing no agitation, or disappointment, or peculiar concern in the discovery. Emma looked at her, quite unable to speak.

"Had you any idea" cried Harriet, "of his being in love with her? - You, perhaps, might. - You (blushing as she spoke) who can see into everybody's heart; but nobody else - "

"Upon my word," said Emma, "I begin to doubt my having any such talent. Can you seriously ask me, Harriet,

whether I imagined him attracted to another woman at the very time that I was - tacitly, if not openly - encouraging you to give way to your own feelings? I never had the slightest suspicion, till within the last hour, of Mr. Frank Churchill's having the least regard for Jane Fairfax. You may be very sure that if I had, I should have cautioned you accordingly."

"Me!" cried Harriet, colouring, and astonished. "Why should you caution me? You do not think I care about Mr. Frank Churchill?"

"I am delighted to hear you speak so stoutly on the subject," replied Emma, smiling; "but you do not mean to deny that there was a time - and not very distant either - when you gave me reason to understand that you did care about him?"

"Him! - never, never. Dear Miss Woodhouse, how could you so mistake me?" turning away distressed.

"Harriet!", cried Emma, after a moment's pause, - "What do you mean? - Good Heaven! what do you mean? - Mistake you! - Am I to suppose then? - "

She could not speak another word. - Her voice was lost; and she sat down, waiting in great terror till Harriet should answer.

Harriet, who was standing at some distance, and with face turned from her, did not immediately say anything; and when she did speak, it was in a voice nearly as agitated as Emma's. "I should not have thought it possible," she began, "that you could have misunderstood me! I know we agreed never to name him - but considering how infinitely superior he is to everybody else, I should not have thought it possible that I could be supposed to mean any other person. Mr. Frank Churchill, indeed! I do not know who would ever look at him in the company of the other. I hope I have a better taste than to think of Mr. Frank Churchill, who is like nobody by his side. And that you should have been so mistaken is amazing! - I am sure, but for believing that you entirely approved and meant to encourage me in my attachment, I should have considered it at first too great a presumption almost, to dare to think of him ... I should not have dared to give way to - I should not have thought it possible - But if you,* who had been always acquainted with him - " 1

1. Emma, pp.404-405.

Harriet still shows a certain dependence on Emma's judgment but for the first time in their relationship she is now more confident and assertive, and some of her comments must humiliate Emma a great deal. Her frank rejection of Frank Churchill for instance, must be a humiliating blow to Emma:

Mr. Frank Churchill, indeed! I do not know who would ever look at him in the company of the other. I hope I have a better taste than to think of Mr. Frank Churchill, who is like nobody by his side. 1

It was Emma who had undertaken to improve Harriet's tastes; she who had encouraged Harriet to aim at marrying refined gentlemen. And how here is Harriet, her tastes refined, rejecting a young man whom Emma had thought fit to flirt with. Interestingly, it is again Harriet, not Emma, who has the instinct to recognise that Mr. Knightley's dancing with her when Mr. Elton had so cruelly snubbed her, is a much more benevolent act than Frank Churchill's rescuing her from the gypsies:

... I was thinking of a much more precious circumstance - of Mr. Knightley's coming and asking me to dance, when Mr. Elton would not stand up with me; and when there was no other partner in the room. That was the kind action; that was the noble benevolence and generosity; that was the service which made me begin to feel how superior he was to every other being upon earth. 2

For Emma, the moment of truth comes when Harriet fearlessly admits that Mr. Knightley returns her affection:

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1. p.405
 2. pp.406-407.

Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched - she admitted - she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself !

Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling, had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world. 1

Emma rises a little above the situation and at this moment proves to be more complex than Harriet. Within a few minutes she experiences more emotion than she has ever known, yet she has the presence of mind to think of what is to be done and the humility to admit that Harriet "does not deserve to be slighted by the very person whose counsels had never led her right." Emma's self-reproach here increases our sympathies for her and completes what Jane Austen had tried to show throughout the novel: that for all her comic faults Emma is a highly complex character with a capacity to profit from experience.

1. pp.407-408.

CHAPTER THREE

COMIC SITUATIONS

In Jane Austen's novels most incidents illustrate character. It is therefore artificial to separate comic situations from comic characters, but as my subject is the technique of comedy I think it appropriate to consider the difference between the merely recreative comic situations of the Juvenilia and the comic situations of the mature novels where character and incident are much better coordinated.

In the Juvenilia Jane Austen's target for ridicule is the contemporary sentimental novel, the dominant form of popular fiction in the eighteenth century. This was the so-called age of sensibility, the period when people most occupied themselves with problems of virtue and sympathy. The public occupied itself with the plight of slaves, prisoners, children and animals, and in philosophy, Cumberland, Locke and Shaftesbury concerned themselves with the nature

of man and of moral conduct. Shaftesbury, generally recognized as the philosopher of philanthropy¹ wrote a lot on humanitarian themes, canvassing for generous and expansive humanity. He believed, in contrast to Hobbes, that man was essentially good and naturally social, and in "Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit" he argued that the good man was he who sought the good of society.

A cult of "sensibility" grew up in the eighteenth century influenced considerably by Shaftesbury's "moral sense." This cult led to various excesses especially in the fiction of the time. Sensibility came to be associated with the mere display of emotions, and a character's worth was judged by his ability to weep and swoon. Harley, the hero of Henry Mackenzie's Man of Feeling for instance, expresses sensibility indiscriminately, reacting to every little sad story with showers of tears. The need to provide constant emotional outbursts drove the eighteenth century sentimental novelist to invent various improbable plots and to sustain them with hackneyed situations and melodramatic actions.

1. In his poem "Seasons" James Thomson calls Shaftesbury the "friend of man":

The generous Ashley thine, the friend of man
 Who scann'd his nature with a brother's eye,
 His weakness prompt to shade, to raise his aim,
 To touch the finer movements of the mind,
 And with the moral beauty charm the heart.

James Thomson, "The Seasons" ed. H.D. Roberts (London, 1906) p.83.

There was bound to be a reaction against such gross distortions of the Shaftesburian "moral sense," and by the 1770's there were numerous parodies and burlesques of novels like the Man of Feeling. Henry Brooke's The Fool of Quality and Charlotte Lennox's Female Quixote had typical quixotic plots. Arabella, the heroine of Female Quixote, is well versed in romantic novels, and supposing them to be real pictures of life proceeds to draw all her notions and expectations from them. She embarks on a series of quixotic adventures which continually expose her absurdity. The author's criticism of sentimental novels is implied in the comic exaggerations and distortions of conventional 'romance' situations.

In her own criticism of the novel of sentiment Jane Austen similarly aims at satirising its intricate and unnatural plots and exposing its stylistic weaknesses. She does this chiefly through burlesque, "a technique in which mockery, critically directed, expresses itself by means of imitation."¹ Very often, the imitation is grossly distorted in order to mock, and Jane Austen's chief weapon of mockery is farce.

1. Lascelles, p.55.

Chambers English Dictionary defines farce as "a ridiculous or empty show - a style of comedy marked by low humour or extravagant wit." L.J. Potts¹ describes it as "physical sensationalism of a ludicrous kind, bearing the same relationship to comedy as melodrama bears to tragedy," and Allardyce Nicoll² calls it "a roughened form of comedy." One characteristic is peculiar to all these definitions: the action of farce is trivial and its purpose is to excite laughter. Farce differs from comedy in that it often makes no connection between plot and character, and usually confines itself to merely physical situations. The physically incongruous situation in Midsummer Nights' Dream where a man wears a donkey's head has often been quoted as a typically farcical spectacle. In most eighteenth century farces the plots are very often thin and clumsy and are only sustained by the various hilarious situations. Mrs. Inchbald's farce, Wedding Day for instance, has not much of a story. Sir Adam Contest marries a country-reared girl, believing his first wife drowned. His young son calls on him to introduce his betrothed and she turns out to be the former Lady Contest (not drowned after all) but unknown to her son. The plot is only carried forward by the basic situation, the idiosyncratic behaviour of Sir Contest and the various coincidences.

1. L.J. Potts, Comedy, (London, 1966) p.137.

2. A. Nicoll, A History of English Drama, 1660-1900 (Cambridge, Eng. 1952) p.178.

In Love and Friendship Jane Austen ridicules the often clumsy and unrealistic plot-techniques of sentimental novels by devising a series of farcical situations built up on coincidences. When Sophia and Laura arrive destitute at an inn in Scotland, they find that a lord driving by in a coach is their grandfather. First we have the rather ludicrous situation in which Lord St. Claire acknowledges Laura as his grandchild:

At his first appearance, my sensibility was wonderfully affected and e'er I had gazed at him a 2nd time my instinctive sympathy whispered to my Heart, that he was my Grandfather. Convinced that I could not be mistaken in my conjecture I instantly sprang from the carriage I had just entered, and following the venerable stranger into the Room he had been shown to, I threw myself on my knees before him and besought him to acknowledge me as his Grandchild: He started, and after having attentively examined my features, raised me from the Ground and throwing his Grandfatherly arms around my Neck, exclaimed, "Acknowledge thee! Yes dear resemblance of my Laurina and Laurina's daughter, sweet image of my Claudia and my Claudia's mother, I do acknowledge thee as the Daughter of the one and the Grand Daughter of the other." 1

We then have the equally absurd coincidence when Lord St. Claire has to acknowledge Sophia as a grandchild as well, and later two other grandchildren, Philander and Gustav, characters hitherto unconnected with the story. At the end of the presentation Lord St. Claire disappears with characteristic suddenness and is not heard of again. This scene is obviously aimed at ridiculing the stock recognition scenes of the sentimental

1. Minor Works, p.91.

novel; the situation is trivial, the characters are not seriously involved and there is no attempt at characterisation. The rather crude parody of sentimental diction contributes some laughter but the entire situation is farcical.

At times Jane Austen relies on purely farcical situations to provide laughter. Fainting fits for instance, are a constant source of amusement in Love and Friendship which burlesques the sentimental novelist's equation of fainting with delicate sensibility. Laura and Sophia are continually fainting in each other's arms, and because they are disengaged from their actions most of the time, their fits are merely repeated for our amusement. The fainting fits with which they indulge their sensibilities when they discover their wounded husbands are described in the ridiculously glowing terms of sentimental diction, and the repetition itself both exaggerates and 'mechanises'¹ the action:

Sophia shrieked and fainted on the ground - I screamed and instantly ran mad - We remained thus mutually deprived of our senses some minutes and on regaining them were deprived of them again. For an Hour and a Quarter did we continue in this Unfortunate situation - Sophia fainting every moment and I running mad as often. 2

1. In Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Bergson points to the kind of amusement afforded when an action is so repeated as to become merely mechanical. We laugh because the repetition reminds us of the child pushing back the 'Jack-in-the-box,' time after time. We are reminded of an action that cannot be suppressed; one which springs up automatically again and again. (pp.69-73).

2. Minor Works, p.99.

Madness and Death are treated just as farcically. Laura's madness loses all gravity as she herself begins to describe it in grandiloquent and nonsensical terms:

My Voice faltered, my eyes assumed a vacant stare, my face became as pale as Death, and my senses were considerably impaired - "Talk not to me of Phaetons (Said I, raving in a frantic, incoherent manner) - Give me a violin - I'll play to him and sooth him in his melancholy Hours - Beware ye gentle Nymphs of Cupid's thunderbolts, avoid the piercing shafts of Jupiter - Look at that grove of firs - I see a leg of mutton - They told me Edward was not Dead; but they deceived me - they tok him for a cucumber - Thus I continued wildly exclaiming on my Edward's Death. 1

Clearly, madness that can so minutely describe itself cannot be taken seriously. Sophia's death is equally farcical. Her heroic death speech points out the moral of the story but does not affect us much because she is not seriously involved in it herself.

Jane Austen occasionally renders situations nonsensical by introducing some kind of distortion. The art of stealing for instance is presented in such a gloriously dignified way that it becomes ridiculous. Sophia, caught stealing money from Graham's drawer, "instantly put on a most forbidding look, and darting an angry frown on the undaunted culprit demanded in a haughty tone of voice wherefore her retirement was thus insolently broken in on?"² The situation is farcically

1. p.100

2. p.96.

reversed, the real culprit becoming the innocent party and MacDonald the villain. Here, as indeed throughout Love and Friendship, Jane Austen goes beyond farce to contrast the behaviour imposed by her character's sentimental code and the realities of the sober world. Sophia and Laura would shudder at the idea of being called thieves but still think their sentimental code allows them the freedom to rob an "unscrupulous man." The reality hits them when they are thrown out of MacDonald House. They faint and swoon as often as they like but almost each time they awaken to the grim facts of reality. In Scotland they both recover from their swoons to discover that Gustav and Philadner have robbed them of their bank notes. Sophia never recovers from a later swoon and Laura lives to learn a lesson from her friend's death. Jane Austen entertains us in the course of this instructive contrast but the comedy is very simple and consists mostly of farce.

A certain amount of farce finds its way into the mature novels. In Pride and Prejudice for instance, the picture of Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley walking round the sitting room of the Bingley household is pure farce, though much more purposeful farce than most incidents in the Juvenilia. It reveals character and enhances plot. It shows the coquetry and frivolity of Miss Bingley, who obviously walks around the room to show off her elegant figure. It also marks the

beginning of Darcy's interest in Elizabeth, for it is only when Elizabeth joins Miss Bingley that he looks up and unconsciously closes his book.

The scene in which Mrs. Bennet asks Mr. Bennet to compel Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins looks very like a stage farce. The comic effect is markedly theatrical. It begins in a highly pitched tone and promises great action. Mrs. Bennet hurries to Mr. Bennet's library in great trepidation, determined to get her way:

Oh! Mr. Bennet, you are wanted immediately; -
We are all in an uproar. You must come and
make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins, for she vows she
will not have him, and if you do not make haste
he will change his mind and not have her* 1

Mr. Bennet's decision to call Elizabeth to his study raises his wife's expectations, and for a moment it looks as if he will do as his wife says and compel Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins. But what follows is anti-climatic:

"Come here, child," cried her father as Elizabeth appeared. "I have sent for you on an affair of importance. I understand that Mr. Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true?" Elizabeth replied that it was. "Very well - and this offer of marriage you have refused?"

"I have, sir."

"Very well. We now come to the point. Your mother insists upon your accepting it. Is not it so, Mrs. Bennett?"

"Yes, or I will never see her again."

1. Pride and Prejudice, p.111.

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not*marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do*." 1

Mrs. Bennet's disappointment and discomfiture do provoke laughter, but unlike pure farce, this scene does succeed in dramatising character. It shows Mr. Bennet's contempt for his wife and indicates what looks like the author's disapproval of his dry unsympathetic wit. His rather abrupt witticism amuses us for a while but leaves us flat and unsatisfied. Like Elizabeth, we too cannot "but smile at such a conclusion of such a beginning. ..." ² for we had been led to expect a more committed and responsible solution to a really serious and frightening problem.

In Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen continues with what she began in Love and Friendship. She contrasts the real world and the world of illusion but moves away from the farce and burlesque of the Juvenilia, incorporating her criticism in a novel of great psychological depth. In Catherine Morland she portrays a character whose illusions and expectations, learnt from sentimental novels, are tested and proved false by experience. Jane Austen creates comic incidents which are closely connected with her theme and carefully designed to set off comic traits of character.

1. pp.111-112.

2. p.112.

Take for example the scene in which Isabella and Catherine persue the young men:

"For Heaven's sake!" [says Isabella to Catherine]
 "let us move away from this end of the room. Do you know, there are two odious young men who have been staring at me this half hour. They really put me quite out of countenance. Let us go and look at the arrivals. They will hardly follow us there." Away they walked to the book; and while Isabella examined the names, it was Catherine's employment to watch the proceedings of these alarming young men.

"They are not coming this way, are they? I hope they are not so impertinent as to follow us. Pray let me know if they are coming. I am determined I will not look up."

In a few moments Catherine, with unaffected pleasure, assured her that she need not be longer uneasy, as the gentlemen had just left the Pump-room.

"And which way are they gone?" said Isabella, turning hastily round. "One was a very good-looking young man."

"They went towards the churchyard."

"Well, I am amazingly glad to have got rid of them! And now, what say you to going to Edgar's Buildings with me, and looking at my new hat? You said you should like to see it."

Catherine readily agreed. "Only," she added, "perhaps we may overtake the two young men."

"Oh! never mind that. If we make haste, we shall pass by them presently, and I am dying to shew you my hat."

"But if we only wait a few minutes, there will be no danger of our seeing them at all."

"I shall not pay them any such compliment, I assure you. I have no notion of treating men with such respect. That*is the way to spoil them."

Catherine had nothing to oppose against such reasoning; and therefore, to show the independence of Miss Thorpe, and her resolution of humbling the sex, they set off immediately as fast as they could walk, in pursuit of the two young men. 1

The picture of the two girls, seemingly determined to avoid the young men yet consciously attracting their attention, makes good low comedy. The author exploits the incongruity between Isabella's protestations and her actions; her determination to ignore the young men and her keen interest in their movements; her resolution of getting rid of them and her actual pursuit of them. She even appears at first to support Isabella's view of the young men, describing them in her tone as "alarming." Her final omniscient comment however ironically points to the self-deception of the young ladies as they imagine themselves actually humbling the young men.

Dramatic irony² also contributes to the comic effect of this scene. The situation presents two interpretations: what Isabella claims and what we make of the scene ourselves. We enjoy it because we can so easily detect the contradiction between Isabella's declared anxiety to avoid the young men and her conscious effort to attract them and are surprised

1. Northanger Abbey, p.43.

2. I am talking in terms of G.G. Sedgewick's definition of dramatic irony: "... the sense of contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition." Of Irony, Especially In Drama (Toronto, 1948) p.48.

and amused that Catherine cannot. The irony shows up the separate characters of Isabella and Catherine, predicting the pattern of their future relationship. It shows Isabella, in opposition to the usually sensible Gothic confidante, as vain, coquettish and trivial, and contrasts her with the gullible but unaffected Catherine. Catherine's innocent remarks show her basic commonsense but her unquestioning attitude towards Isabella shows her susceptibility.

The following conversation between Catherine and Henry Tilney in the Pump-room seems at first sight to be a merely amusing dramatic piece. The action is trivial. Henry Tilney does not seem at all serious and appears merely to be amusing himself. But he has actually taken over from the author the role of ironic commentator and is imitating and mocking the stock conversational pieces of sentimental fiction. Fancying Catherine to be conversant with sentimental fiction, he begins his conversation in a tone of mock solemnity, parodying the affected phraseology of Gothic dialogue:

"I have hitherto been very remiss, madam, in the proper attentions of a partner here; I have not yet asked how long you have been in Bath; whether you were ever here before; whether you have been at the Upper Rooms, the theatre, and the concert; and how you like the place altogether. I have been very negligent - but are you now at leisure to satisfy me in these particulars? If you are I will begin directly."

"You need not give yourself that trouble, Sir."

"No trouble I assure you, madam." Then forming his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice, he added, with a simpering air, "Have you been long in Bath, Madam?"

"About a week, sir" replied Catherine, trying not to laugh."

"Really!" with affected astonishment.

"Why should you be surprized, sir?"

"Why, indeed!" said he in his natural tone - "but some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply, and surprize is more easily assumed and not less reasonable than any other. - Now let us go on. Were you never here before, Madam?"

"Never, Sir"

"Indeed! Have you yet honoured the Upper Rooms?"

"Yes, sir, I was there last Monday."

"Have you been to the theatre?"

"Yes, sir, I was at the play on Tuesday."

"To the concert?"

"Yes, sir, on Wednesday."

"And are you altogether pleased with Bath?"

"Yes - I like it very well."

"Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again."

Catherine turned away her head, not knowing whether she might venture to laugh. 1

Henry Tilney's physical reactions throughout the conversation is a parody of the behaviour of the sentimental hero. He smiles, laughs affectedly, forms his features into a "set smile,"

1. Northanger Abbey, pp.25-26.

softens his voice and speaks with a "simpering air" purposely to exaggerate and mock his affectations. The exchange itself while critical of sentimental fiction is also important in showing an aspect of Catherine's character; its simplicity and naturalness which endear her to Henry Tilney. Henry immediately senses that she is not a typical Gothic novel reader and he begins to be impressed by her easy unaffected manners and gradually to relax his mocking tone.

In other comic situations Jane Austen is interested in a wider range of characters, and comedy derives from the contrast and balance of the characters involved. Let us consider for example, the scene in Sense and Sensibility where Lucy Steele, Elinor, Edward and Marianne find themselves in the same room. Here is a classic example of dramatic irony. Lucy and Elinor know more about the situation than Edward and Marianne, though Edward knows more than Marianne and thinks he knows more than Elinor. Marianne's innocent and spontaneous remarks have implications she is unaware of. When she says to Edward: "... don't think of my* health. Elinor is well, you see. That must be enough for us both."¹ she has no idea that she is embarrassing both Edward and Elinor and making Lucy jealous, and she talks on, accumulating embarrassing and comic double significances:

1. Sense and Sensibility, p.242.

"But why were you not there, Edward? - Why did you not come?"

"I was engaged elsewhere."

"Engaged! But what was that, when such friends were to be met?"

"Perhaps, Miss Marianne," cried Lucy, eager to take some revenge on her, "you think young men never stand upon engagements, if they have no mind to keep them, little as well as great."

Elinor was very angry, but Marianne seemed entirely insensible of the sting; for she calmly replied, "Not so, indeed; for, seriously speaking, I am very sure that conscience only kept Edward from Harley Street. And I really believe he has* the most delicate conscience in the world; the most scrupulous in performing every engagement however minute, and however it may make against his interest or pleasure. He is the most fearful of giving pain, of wounding expectation, and the most incapable of being selfish, of anybody I ever saw." 1

The words "engaged" and "engagements" have double implications. Marianne takes them in the contextual sense, but Edward Elinor and Lucy are reminded of other things. When Lucy talks of young men "standing upon engagements" she is thinking of her own engagement to Edward, reminding Elinor of it and hinting at Marianne's jilting by Willoughby. By saying that Edward is too honourable to break any engagement, she is slyly reminding him and Elinor of his commitments. Marianne's reply is ironical because it is so well meant and yet so embarrassing for Edward. She talks of his "delicate conscience,"

1. pp.243-244.

his "scrupulous performance of the minutest engagement," his "unselfishness," commendation which would have been well received by Edward if they were not so ironically applicable to his commitment to Lucy. Without being aware of it, Marianne strengthens Lucy's expectations and increases her triumph.

As spectators we see all aspects of the situation and can feel the implications of the double-edged statements. Comedy springs from the comparison of what Marianne says with what we think she would have said if she had known the facts. But apart from the comedy, the situation shows certain important aspects of Marianne's character which up to now have been overshadowed by her excessive sensibility. Her sensibility has often made her contemptuous of decorum and insensitive to Elinor's embarrassments. Later it is to make her selfishly indulgent in her own sorrow and unaware of Elinor's private suffering. But in this comic scene, Jane Austen shows Marianne's capacity for unselfishness. Edward's concern about her would have made an ideal opportunity for her to break down and exhibit her sorrow but though her eyes fill with tears, she quickly diverts attention to Elinor. Her judgment of Edward is generous and sensitive and shows her to be as perceptive as Elinor, while her calm and controlled rejection of Lucy's spiteful reference to her and Willoughby show a mature composure up to now obscured by her sensibility.

A similar ironic scene in which characters are grouped for contrast and balance occurs in chapter twenty-eight of Emma. Miss Bates sees Mr. Knightley through her window and goes into the next room to speak to him:

"How d'ye do? - how d'ye do? - Very well, I thank you. So obliged to you for the carriage last night. We were just in time; my mother just ready for us. Pray come in; do come in. You will find some friends here."

So began Miss Bates; and Mr. Knightley seemed determined to be heard in his turn, for most resolutely and commandingly did he say: "How is your niece, Miss Bates? - I want to inquire after you all, but particularly your niece. How is Miss Fairfax? ... Tell me how Miss Fairfax is."

And Miss Bates was obliged to give a direct answer before he would hear her in anything else. The listeners were amused; and Mrs. Weston gave Emma a look of particular meaning. But Emma still shook her head in steady scepticism.

"So obliged to you! - So very much obliged to you for the carriage," resumed Miss Bates.

He cut her short with "I am going to Kingston. Can I do anything for you?"

"Oh dear, to Kingston - are you? Mrs. Cole was saying the other day she wanted something from Kingston."

"Mrs. Cole has servants to send. Can I do anything for you?"*

"No, I thank you. But do come in. Who do you think is here? - Miss Woodhouse and Miss Smith; so kind as to call to hear the new pianoforté. Do put up your horse at the Crown, and come in."

"Well," said he in a deliberating manner, "for five minutes, perhaps."

"And here is Mrs. Weston and Mr. Frank Churchill too! Quite delightful; so many friends!"

"No, not now, I thank you. I could not stay two minutes. I must get on to Kingston as fast as I can."

"Oh! do come in. They will be very happy to see you."

"No, no, your room is full enough. I will call another day and hear the pianoforté." 1

The situation is so contrived that though Miss Bates and Mr. Knightley are isolated from the others, their conversation is overheard by them and they give themselves away. Miss Bates is exuberant and rambling, Mr. Knightley direct and commanding. Mr. Knightley's ability to force direct answers from Miss Bates amuses the others and reminds Emma and Mrs. Weston of a previous conversation. His refusal to stop at the Bates' apartment after hearing of Frank Churchill's presence is transparently in character. But the irony of his speeches is in their effect upon the listeners in the other room. When for instance, he says half-jokingly, knowing they are overheard, "I do not see why Miss Fairfax should not be mentioned too. I think Miss Fairfax dances very well," he is, under a comic cover, expressing his jealous irritation with Frank Churchill and Emma.

In the conversation between Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston at Hartfield, dramatic irony works in a slightly different way. Two characters act in ignorance of their condition but are occasionally allowed momentary insights into their

1. Emma, pp.243-244.

situations. Mr. Weston and Mrs. Elton appear to be talking and listening to each other but are really only expressing their respective 'humours'. Mr. Weston, the doting father, is obsessed with his son, and Mrs. Elton, the snob and the self-admiring bride, incessantly raves about her relatives, the Sucklings. The reader is placed at the vantage position of knowing what each is striving for and can see through their various manoeuvres. At first the two characters merely reveal their individual preoccupations in a comic misinterpretation of each other's meaning. Mr. Weston says: "I hope I shall soon have the pleasure of introducing my son to you,"¹ and Mrs. Elton interprets this as a personal compliment and smiles graciously while Mr. Weston assumes she is particularly delighted at the prospect of meeting his son.

Their conversation becomes a constant battle for personal attention as each character strives to direct attention to his favourite subject. Mrs. Elton first takes advantage of Mr. Weston's reference to the distance between London and Enscombe to suggest the respectability and affluence of the Sucklings. Mr. Weston, having politely listened to her, proceeds with his own story about the Churchills, completely uninterested in Mrs. Elton's suggestive remarks about the Sucklings. Mrs. Elton listens politely to Mr. Weston but is equally inattentive to his story and only anxious to return to her account of the Sucklings. She hears something about Mrs. Churchill's meaning

1. p.305.

to sleep only two nights on the road and without knowing why, seizes upon it as a means of returning to her account. She suggests Mrs. Suckling's cultivated taste and at the same time hints at her own delicacy:

... If you knew how Selina feels with respect to sleeping at an inn, you would not wonder at Mrs. Churchill's making incredible exertions to avoid it. Selina says it is quite a horror to her - and I believe I have caught a little of her nicety. She always travels with her own sheets; an excellent precaution. Does Mrs. Churchill do the same? 1

Funnily enough, Mr. Weston does not see through her manoeuvre, and so refuses the cue. Anxious not to give any impression that his own Mrs. Churchill is not as fine a lady as Mrs. Suckling, he replies:

Depend upon it, Mrs. Churchill does everything that any other fine lady ever did. Mrs. Churchill will not be second to any lady in the land for - 2

At this point Mrs. Elton makes a foolish blunder. Believing she has already established Selina's respectability, she grows complacent and eagerly interposes with:

"Oh! Mr. Weston, do not mistake me. Selina is no fine lady, I assure you. Do not run away with such an idea. 3

It is too late to recant. Mrs. Elton completely loses ground as Mr. Weston seizes the opportunity to establish Mrs. Churchill's superiority over Selina:

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1. p.306.
 2. p.306.
 3. p.306.

Is not she? Then she is no rule for Mrs. Churchill, who is as thorough a fine lady as anybody ever beheld. 1

For a time Mrs. Elton is discomfitted. She feels foolish and let down as she recognises her blunder in warmly disclaiming *That* Selina is a fine lady.

A little later in their conversation Mr. Weston makes a similar blunder when he pretends to be modest about his son. He says casually to Mrs. Elton while obviously glowing with pride:

... I hope you will be pleased with my son; but you must not expect a prodigy. He is generally thought a fine young man, but do not expect a prodigy. 2

And instead of the rapturous praises for Frank which he obviously expects from Mrs. Elton, this is what he gets:

... I have very little doubt that my opinion will be decidedly in his favour. I have heard so much in praise of Mr. Frank Churchill. - At the same time it is fair to observe, that I am one of those who always judge for themselves, and are by no means implicitly guided by others. I give you notice that as I find your son, so I shall judge of him - I am no flatterer. 3

For a time, Mr. Weston feels foolish, and like Mrs. Elton begins to think how best to make up for the needless blunder.

On both these occasions, the author switches from comic exposure to give the characters an awareness of their situations. But as if unwilling to allow them even this measure

1. p.306.
2. p.309.
3. p.309.

of self-knowledge, she quickly returns to dramatic irony, and the characters continue in blind unawareness, giving themselves away and amusing the reader. Mrs. Elton takes advantage of Mr. Weston's reference to Enscombe to return to 'Maple Grove,' her favourite subject, and to the opportunity of retracting her blunder. She strives to establish Selina's superiority over Mrs. Churchill at least in personal resources, managing to throw some light on her own resources as well:

... Mrs. Churchill probably has no health or spirits like Selina to enjoy that sort of seclusion. Or, perhaps, she may not have resources enough in herself to be qualified for a country life. I always say a woman cannot have too many resources - and I feel very thankful that I have so many myself as to be quite independent of society. 1

Mr. Weston is stuck. Uninterested in the personal resources of either Selina or her sister, he completely ignores the subject in question and begins a new one: "Frank was here in February for a fortnight. ..." Mrs. Elton allows him the diversion but craftily directs the conversation back to herself:

So I remember to have heard. He will find an addition* to the society of Highbury when he comes again; that is, if I may presume to call myself an addition. But perhaps he may never have heard of there being such a creature in the world. 2

1. p.307.

2. p.307.

Her obvious call for compliment is immediately understood by Mr. Weston. He pays the desired compliment, eases his conscience and feels safe to return to his account of his son:

My dear Madam! Nobody but yourself could imagine such a thing possible. Not heard of you! I believe Mrs. Weston's letters lately have been full of nothing else than Mrs. Elton.

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 "When Frank left us," continued he, "it was quite uncertain when we might see him again, which makes this day's news doubly welcome. 1

The important thing about this comic exchange is the way it reveals the monumental egotism of both Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston. Their conversation is a constant battle for personal attention. There is no rapport whatsoever between them and the only concession they allow each other is the polite appearance of attentiveness. Sometimes even this polite tolerance breaks down. Mr. Weston, tired and impatient with Mrs. Elton's bragging about herself and her husband, is obliged to stop her short with a meaningful cough and to seize the opportunity to return to his own story about the Churchills. It is amusing to see two people apparently engaged in the ordinary give and take of conversation so inattentive to each other, working so hard and so attentively engrossing the conversation. Their dialogue is particularly ironic because they are so utterly unaware of what they reveal to the reader about themselves.

1. p.308.

In Emma the dramatisation of Emma Woodhouse's self-deceptions provides various dramatic ironies. Emma's illusions occupy the centre of the novel, and the drama moves forward without much interruption while we derive amusement from her mistaken assumptions. The dramatic ironies are made possible because we are provided with information that Emma cannot and will not possess, and unlike her, "too eager and busy in her previous conceptions and views to see with clear vision,"¹ we are unbiased and free to judge objectively. In the first stage of the action the point of the irony is our realisation that the intelligent and confident Emma, so attentive to Elton's behaviour and so often accurate in her judgment of him, should be blind to his real intentions and be unaware of the encouragement she gives him.

The series of events which lead to the comic climax of Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma, provide various instances when Emma's judgment of Mr. Elton is perfectly correct. When the two characters are brought together in chapter six, for instance, Emma senses his unwillingness to contradict her statements about Harriet's beauty and even mimics his trite poetic expression with amused contempt:

"Exactly so;" [says Mr. Elton], that is what principally strikes me. So much superadded decision of character! Skilful has been the hand /

1. p, 110.

"Great has been the pleasure, I am sure," [replies Emma/ "I never met with a disposition more truly amiable." 1

She detects his insincerity when he rapturously praises her paintings yet fails completely to see that his attentions are directed at her and not at Harriet, being "too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear him impartially or see him with clear vision. ..."2

At times Mr. Elton and Emma make remarks which are so in line with each other's expectations that they unconsciously perpetuate each other's ignorance of the situation. Before Emma begins Harriet's portrait she shows specimens of her previous portraits to Mr. Elton and explains how Isabella's disapprobation of her portrait of John Knightley had determined her against painting further portraits:

"... as I said, I did then forswear ever drawing anybody again. But for Harriet's sake, or rather for my own, and as there are no husbands and wives in the case at present, I will break my resolution now." 3

Emma's account of Isabella's reaction is a clever analogy for the situation as she has imagined it. It is after all, Harriet's portrait that she is about to paint, and as she has long persuaded herself that Mr. Elton is in love with Harriet, her expression "no husbands and wives in the case at present," is

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1. pp.42-43.
 2. p.110.
 3. p.46.

only meant to give Mr. Elton a hint of their future marriage. When Mr. Elton meaningfully and amorously repeats her words "with so interesting a consciousness," he gives her an impression that he has understood her hints, and Emma thinks all this encouraging for Harriet. Similarly when Elton meets Emma and Harriet at Vicarage Lane, he interprets Emma's actions to suit his own expectations, seeing Emma's anxiety to separate herself from him merely as feminine shyness and probably interpreting her incessant chats with his housekeeper as the natural interest of a future mistress. The blindness seems mutual for Emma's own satisfied reflections on their meeting can sum up Mr. Elton's private thoughts on the same event:

... she could not but flatter herself that it had been the occasion of much present enjoyment to both, and must be leading them forward to the great event. 1

Sometimes the dramatic ironies in Emma are much more complex; like those in the second stage of action which involve Emma, Harriet, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Emma is unaware of Frank's secret engagement to Jane Fairfax though this time her fantasy-making is not solely responsible for the misunderstanding; Frank is actively engaged in deception, having sensed Emma's ignorance of his relationship with Jane

1. p.90.

Fairfax and decided to exploit it.¹ As a result, in place of simple uncomplicated situations in which the only source of laughter is Emma's ignorance and self-deception, we have situations in which irony is critically directed in a complexly humiliating way. A typical instance is the scene at the Bateses' sitting room after Miss Bates has called Harriet, Mrs. Weston, Emma and Frank to come and give their opinion of Jane's pianoforté. As Jane Fairfax begins to play, Frank makes a series of ambiguous comments which can be interpreted at three different levels:

"Whoever Col. Campbell might employ," said Frank Churchill, with a smile at Emma, "the person has not chosen ill. I heard a good deal of Colonel Campbell's taste at Weymouth; and the softness of the upper notes I am sure is exactly what he and all that party* would particularly prize. I dare say, Miss Fairfax, that he either gave his friend very minute directions, or wrote to Broadway himself. Do not you think so?

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How much your friends in Ireland must be enjoying your pleasure on this occasion, Miss Fairfax. I dare say they often think of you, and wonder which will be the day, the precise day of the instrument's coming to hand. Do you imagine Col. Campbell knows the business to be going forward just at this time? Do you imagine it to be the consequence of an immediate commission from him, or that he may have sent only a general direction, an order, indefinite as to time, to depend upon contingencies and conveniences? 2

1. There are one or two occasions however when Frank does not seem so sure of Emma's ignorance. As he confesses in his letters to Mrs. Weston, he could not help suspecting at times that Emma had detected him: "... She may not have surmised the whole, but her quickness must have penetrated a part ... She frequently gave me hints of it. I remember her telling me at the ball, that I owed Mrs. Elton gratitude for her attentions to Miss Fairfax."

Emma, p.438.

2. p.241.

The party in general might unsuspectingly imagine Frank Churchill to be admiring Mr. Campbell's gift. Emma is certain he is addressing her, continuing the secret understanding between them and inviting her to share his surmises about Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon. But the reader, after a second reading,¹ knows that Frank is merely exploiting Emma's ignorance to address Jane Fairfax. He controls the entire situation, and the irony is all at Emma's expense. She is completely taken in as Frank and Jane conduct a tête-à-tête in her very presence. For instance, when Frank says:

Very thoughtful of Col. Campbell, was not it? - He knew Miss Fairfax could have no music here; I honour that part of the attention particularly; it shows it to have been so thoroughly from the heart. Nothing hastily done; nothing incomplete. True affection only could have prompted it. 2

Emma thinks he is merely embarrassing Jane Fairfax, but he is actually addressing Jane and assuring her of his love for her. He enjoys the entire scene, and some of his comments have such fitting double significances. As he and Emma look over Jane Fairfax' music, Emma whispers:

"You speak too plain. She must understand you."

And Frank answers:

1. We re-interpret Frank's statements after a second reading because it is only at the end of the novel when the secret engagement between him and Jane is revealed that we are able to measure his intrigue.

2. p.242.

"I hope she does. I would have her understand me. I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning." 1

Emma immediately understands him: he is not ashamed of his suspicions about Jane and Mr. Dixon. But Frank is of course saying that he is not ashamed of his love for Jane Fairfax.

Later, when Frank asks Jane some embarrassing questions about the pianoforté, Jane answers in a voice of forced calmness: "Till I have a letter from Colonel Campbell ... I can imagine nothing with any confidence," and Frank comments: "Conjecture - aye, sometimes one conjectures right, and sometimes one conjectures wrong."² At this point Emma is likely to be embarrassed by his spirited jesting but Frank, I think, is joking with Emma while privately and ironically enjoying his superior knowledge.

Emma continues to be deceived about Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. At the tea party at Hartfield, she plays a game of words with Frank. Frank makes out a word and passes it on to her. She understands it at once and though slightly conscience-stricken, enjoys what she thinks is a joke against Jane Fairfax, confident that only she and Frank know what it is all about. What she fails to see is that for Frank, the game is merely a means of communicating with Jane, of explaining to her the "blunder" of his careless allusion to information

1. p.243.

2. pp.241-242.

from her letter. Emma remains convinced of her grasp of the situation but is in actual fact duped by Frank Churchill and her own imagination.

Throughout the dramatic ironies, Jane Austen is not merely concerned with publicly embarrassing or humiliating Emma but with evaluating her character. Emma's comic misunderstandings are therefore not arbitrarily devised to entertain the reader but are shown as the result of her emotional and sexual immaturity. While she recognises and understands all the material advantages of marriage, she is still not mature enough to regard love as anything but a game. She has never been in love yet at the beginning of the novel she has a lot to say on love and courtship. Her interpretations are superficially knowing: she regards a sigh for instance, as a sure sign of love and can detect Mr. Elton's love for Harriet from the tone and duration of his sighs. Ultimately Emma herself has to realise that she has viewed life merely as a game in which to display her powers of imagination.

But the author, while anxious to point out her heroine's faults, still retains some measure of sympathy for her by subtly suggesting her more redeeming qualities. During the dramatic ironies at the Bateses' apartment for instance, she publicly humiliates Emma but still shows her as morally superior to Frank Churchill, whom she and Mr. Knightley condemn for his lack of openness and his deceit.

Not all comic situations in Jane Austen are based on dramatic irony. Some situations merely reinforce the comedy of character, their comic effect deriving from the exposure of a character's weakness or from the contrast and balance of several characters. In the scene in Sense and Sensibility where the Steele sisters visit Barton Park and deliberately court Lady Middleton's favour by hypocritically admiring her and humouring her children, the source of comedy is in the exposure of Lady Middleton's self-deception and of the persistent dishonesty of the Steele sisters. Elinor, Marianne and the reader look on critically as the three characters play into each other's hands. The situation focusses and contrasts the 'humours' of all the characters. The Steele sisters expose their hypocrisy by the fulsome endurance with which they bear the intolerable behaviour of the little Middletons, and Lady Middleton exhibits her delusion by the complacency with which she takes the pretences of the Steeles.¹ She believes, and the Miss Steeles pretend to believe, that Little Anna Maria is a quiet gentle girl. But the author's account of her accident, though appearing to support their views, ironically presents a different picture, showing Anna Maria as a little terror who knows what she wants and how to get it. Lady Middleton is not sufficiently self-aware to be disconcerted and the Steele girls too persistent in hypocrisy to care:

1. See also the discussion on pp.183-184.

"Poor little creature!" said Miss Steele, as soon as they were gone. "It might have been a very sad accident."

"Yet I hardly know how," cried Marianne, "unless it had been under totally different circumstances. But this is the usual way of heightening alarm, where there is nothing to be alarmed at in reality."

"What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is," said Lucy Steele. Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion ..."¹

The author contrasts the Steele girls' affectation of sensibility with Marianne's genuine sensibility and suggests that though Marianne's sensibility is often excessive and at times downright selfish, it is never inspired by the kind of opportunism exhibited by the Steele sisters.

In Pride and Prejudice Lady Catherine's condescending visit to Longbourn and her subsequent confrontation with Elizabeth is another comic situation primarily aimed at exposing character. Lady Catherine's defects are made particularly grotesque and comic because Elizabeth acts as a foil to her and sharpens her eccentricities. If we do not accept a character's claim to superiority, all expressions of it become comic, and in the exchange between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth, the point of the comedy is the disparity between Lady Catherine's own sense of her importance and our sense of her unimportance.² She hurries to Longbourn,

1. Sense and Sensibility, p.122.

2. I have analysed this scene in my chapter on "Comic Characters" (pp 80-82) but I think the confrontation is also an important illustration of the comedy of situation.

confident in her power to compel Elizabeth to do as she wishes but soon learns that her power and authority can be foiled by a mere commoner. Elizabeth not only refuses to be bullied by her but also exposes her intellectual inferiority by her rational argument. For instance, Lady Catherine first describes the report of Elizabeth's engagement to Darcy as a "scandalous falsehood" and then foolishly proceeds to say that upon hearing of it she "instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you."¹ Elizabeth points out the contradiction in her statements:

"If you believed it impossible to be true," said Elizabeth with disdain, "I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?"

"At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted."

"Your coming to Longbourn to see me and my family," said Elizabeth coolly, "will be rather a contradiction of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence."²

Unable to match Elizabeth's cool reasoning, she hopes at least to subdue her by claiming that Mrs. De Bourgh and Mr. Darcy are engaged:

Let me be rightly understood. This match to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr. Darcy is engaged to my* daughter.* Now what have you to say?

1. Pride and Prejudice, pp.353-354.

2. p.354.

Elizabeth: "Only this; that if he is so, you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me." 1

At the end of the confrontation, the immense power and authority which Lady Catherine assumed at the beginning are diminished, though she herself remains incorrigibly convinced of her superiority. Believing that Elizabeth has forfeited the compliments of a superior, she declares with the cool air of a superior:

I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet. I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased. 2

We can by now measure and enjoy the magnitude of her delusion.

Other comic situations, though still reinforcing the comedy of character, represent what I would call 'comic climaxes'. They occur at the peak of the novel's dramatic action, the point where all conflicts and misunderstandings converge, where deception and self-deception are exploded and where truth is revealed. Some characters find their expectations frustrated and there is a general relaxation of tension and a recognition of folly. In Emma there are two such situations. The first is the scene where Emma and Mr. Elton make the journey back from Randalls. Mr. Elton's declaration of love to Emma triggers off the revelations. Both characters voice what they have secretly imagined all along and realise they have misinterpreted each other's actions.

1. p.354.

2. p.358.

The second comic situation represents the main climax of the novel. It is the scene in which Emma and Harriet discuss the news of Frank Churchill's engagement to Jane Fairfax. This comic climax is more complicated and more emotionally charged. Emma is genuinely terrified of having to break the news to Harriet, and when Harriet shows no agitation she is really perplexed. The exchange itself is interspersed with ironies which remind Emma of her previous mistakes and humiliate her even more. At the most crucial point, for instance, when she is just beginning to realise how wrongly she has judged, Harriet refers to "her power of seeing into everybody's heart.":

"Had you any idea," cried Harriet, "of his being in love with her? You, perhaps, might - you (blushing as she spoke) who can see into everybody's heart; but nobody else - "

"Upon my word," said Emma, "I begin to doubt my having any such talent ..."¹

Emma has always prided herself on her powers of perception but has to admit that she had misinterpreted almost every situation she had confidently presumed to understand.

Unlike the scene with Mr. Elton where Emma merely experiences the anger of having been misunderstood and the discomfiture of having blundered, we have here the additional terrifying realisation that she is herself in love with the

1. Emma, p.404.

very man Harriet claims to be in love with:

... Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! ¹

Comedy here is profoundly and movingly combined with a serious recognition of feeling, but the main source of comedy however is in the clear contrast drawn between the two characters. While Harriet is a little more confident and assertive now than she has ever been in her relationship with Emma, she shows herself still considerably dependent on Emma's judgment. Her hopes of Mr. Knightley returning her affections are not based on any real facts, but on his attention, his interest on behalf of Martin and on things Emma had once casually said. In contrast, Emma reacts with maturity, initiative and reserve. She does not give herself away but is soon in command of the situation and thinking ahead to what is to be done thus showing herself different from Harriet and the other comic fools in her capacity for control and self-knowledge.

There are still certain situations in Jane Austen which though illustrating character, derive their comic effect from the way people relate to objects. In Laughter Henri Bergson discusses the comedy of the relationship between people and

1. p.408.

objects and points to the peculiar comic effect achieved when a mechanical element is introduced into nature. He distinguishes various coarse and refined varieties of such situations and argues that an incident is comic if it calls our attention to the physical aspect of a person when it is morality that should concern us.¹ Such an incident momentarily transforms a person into a thing, making his actions seem mechanical.

One or two such Bergsonian events occur in Jane Austen. The author deliberately emphasises the physical and trivial at the expense of the moral and spiritual in the scene in Emma where Harriet solemnly declares her decision to burn the "precious treasures" she had secretly kept in Mr. Elton's memory, the court plaster and the bit of pencil. These objects which are made so much of, are the trivial manifestations of Harriet's passion for Mr. Elton. The scene is both humorous and pathetic. A sense of expectation is conveyed by Harriet's reflective tone:

It is my duty, and I am sure it is my wish ... to have no reserve with you on this subject. As I am happily quite an altered creature in one respect, it is very fit that you should have the satisfaction of knowing it. I do not want to say more than is necessary. I am too much ashamed of having given way as I have done, and I dare say you understand me. 2

1. Bergson, pp.49-51.
2. Emma, p.337.

Her serious manner prepares Emma for something out of the ordinary. But what does follow is an anti-climax:

She held the parcel towards her, and Emma read the words 'most precious treasures' on the top. Her curiosity was greatly excited. Harriet unfolded the parcel, and she looked on with impatience. Within abundance of silver paper was a pretty little Tumbridge-Ware box, which Harriet opened: it was well-lined with the softest cotton; but excepting the cotton; Emma saw only a small piece of court-plaister. 1

The court-plaster and the bit of pencil are little objects which bring out the ridiculous element in Harriet's "passionate" attachment to Mr. Elton, and Emma's reaction helps to deflate the serious implications of Harriet's actions:

"But, Harriet," [says Emma] is it necessary to burn the court plaister? - I have not a word to say for the bit of old pencil, but the court-plaister might be useful." 2

The incident is a humorous condemnation by the author of the kind of romantic love with which both Emma and Harriet have indulged their fancies. It takes us from the romantic view to a sternly practical one. The anti-climax here is a tiny example of the structural principle on which the novel as a whole is based.

Two similar scenes occur in Northanger Abbey. At certain crucial moments of the novel when we are particularly poised to expect a moral reaction from Mrs. Allen, our attention is

1. p.338.
2. p.340.

instead immediately diverted to her most trivial reactions. When Mr. Allen comments on the immorality of young men and women driving about the country in open carriages and going to inns and public places, he naturally seeks his wife's approval of his moral standard:

"... I am sure Mrs. Morland would not be pleased, Mrs. Allen, are not you of my way of thinking. Do not you think these kinds of projects objectionable?"

"Yes, very much so indeed. [answers Mrs. Allen] Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them. You are splashed getting in and getting out, and the wind takes your hair and your bonnet in every direction. I hate an open carriage myself." 1

The author identifies Mrs. Allen's moral feelings with her feelings about clothes in order to highlight her "humour," and comedy springs from the unexpected diversion from the moral to the physical.

A similar comic effect is achieved earlier on in the novel. Catherine, feeling a little guilty about her failure to keep her appointment with Miss Tilney and her brother, is particularly anxious to know she was doing the right thing by calling on Miss Tilney to explain her conduct. She turns to Mrs. Allen for support, expecting some sort of moral approval or disapproval. But Mrs. Allen's reaction is far from moral:

1. Northanger Abbey, p.104.

"Mrs. Allen," said Catherine the next morning, "will there be any harm in my calling on Miss Tilney today? I shall not be easy till I have explained everything."

"Go by all means, my dear; only put on a white gown; Miss Tilney always wears white."¹

Again, the unexpected deviation from morality to clothes accentuates and "mechanises" Mrs. Allen's "humour."

A slightly different version of the 'Bergsonian' comic situation occurs in Mansfield Park, when Tom Bertram defends the play-acting project, arguing that it would help ease Lady Bertram's moral anxiety during Sir Thomas' absence. In the course of Tom's earnest argument, the author switches to a contrasting picture of an inert and indolent Lady Bertram:

As he said this, each looked towards their mother. Lady Bertram, sunk back in one corner of the sofa, the picture of health, wealth, ease, and tranquillity, was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her.²

Here the physical is the important emphasis, and comedy does not derive so much from the way a character relates to objects as from the author's own diversion from the moral to the physical. The picture of physical and mental apathy which Lady Bertram epitomises is a brilliant anti-climax to Tom Bertram's moral prosings and an indication of the hollowness of his argument.

¹ p. 91

² Mansfield Park, p. 126.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NARRATOR'S COMIC VOICE

Although the events in her novels are usually dramatised as taking place in the present moment and characters often reveal themselves through conversation, Jane Austen's own voice, detached, authoritative and witty, is always present. I want to examine its characteristic features and show how these contribute to the comic effect of her novels.

The most striking characteristic of her voice is irony. In its simplest form irony is a device by "the whyche a man sayth one thing and gyveth to understand the contraye,"¹ but in Jane Austen's hands it does far more than merely reverse literal meanings: it expresses her purpose as a comic novelist, which is to point out follies, contradictions and incongruities in human behaviour. In her early works her ironic devices are not always very subtle. A straightforward authorial assertion may be obviously and crudely

1. N.E.D. 1502 (cited by) Sedgewick, p.5.

contradicted or qualified. This is how a trivial conversation between Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe is described:

The following conversation, which took place between the two friends in the Pump-room one morning, after an acquaintance of eight or nine days is given as a specimen of their very warm attachment, and of the delicacy, discretion, originality of thought, and literary taste which marked the reasonableness of that attachment. 1

This assertion is immediately contradicted by the actual conversation. Isabella uses vigorous words to publicise an intense affection for Catherine, but the vigour is suspicious: her vocabulary is exaggerated and most of her expressions are mere clichés. She boasts about her qualities as a friend: "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature. My attachments are always excessively strong,"² but her remarks about Miss Andrews provide an adequate commentary:

I told Capt. Hunt at one of our assemblies this winter, that if he was to tease me all night, I would not dance with him unless he would allow Miss Andrews to be as beautiful as an angel ... you have so much animation, which is exactly what Miss Andrews wants, for I must confess there is something rather insipid about her. 3

Her literary taste is displayed in her comment on Sir Charles Grandison: "an amazing horrid book," and her originality of thought, though it impresses Catherine, is the usual stuff from sentimental novels. Looking back, we can see the strong

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1. Northanger Abbey, p.39.
 2. p.40.
 3. pp.40-41.

sarcasm of the author's introduction but the recognition is retrospective.

In Northanger Abbey Jane Austen's assertions about Mrs. Allen's character and role in the novel are immediately contradicted by her actual description of her. First, she leads the reader on to expect a typically mischievous Gothic chaperone, one whose vulgarity and wickedness would "reduce poor Catherine to all the desperate wretchedness of which a last volume is capable."¹ Then turning the tables on the Gothic novel reader, she mocks and frustrates his expectations by giving a description of Mrs. Allen which is utterly inconsistent with the bizarre predictions. Far from being a villain, Mrs. Allen "had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment nor manner. The air of a gentle-woman, a great deal of quiet inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind, were all that could account for her being the choice of a sensible, intelligent, man like Mr. Allen."² Jane Austen makes a satiric hit at men and marriages when she emphasises Mrs. Allen's dullness and harmlessness and shows them as the only qualities that could recommend her to the intelligent and sensible Mr. Allen. Her point about Mrs. Allen's ordinariness however, is a warning to the reader not to expect a Gothic chaperone.

1. p.20.

2. p.20.

Jane Austen does not always give us such violent and ironic reversals. Sometimes a word stands self-contradicted because it is inconsistent with the total impression given by character or situation. When a man as consistently vain as Sir Walter is at some point in Persuasion described as "modest,"¹ it is obvious that we are simply required to reverse the meaning of "modest." A similar ironic reversal is required of us when the very selfish and inconsiderate Mrs. Norris is described at some point as "considerate."²

Occasionally however a word (or a group of words) is contradicted by another word in the same sentence. Take this description of little Anna Maria's accident in Sense and Sensibility:

But unfortunately in bestowing these embraces, a pin in her ladyship's head dress slightly scratching the child's neck, produced from this pattern of gentleness, such violent screams, as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy. The mother's consternation was excessive; but it could not surpass the alarm of the Miss Steeles, and everything was done by all three, in so critical an emergency, which affection could suggest as likely to assuage the agonies of the little sufferer. 3

Jane Austen is mocking Lady Middleton's delusions about her daughter and showing up the hypocrisy of the Miss Steeles. Lady Middleton believes, and the Miss Steeles pretend to believe, that little Anna Maria is the very pattern of gentleness. Jane Austen appears to accept this too but rejects it immediately.

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1. Persuasion, p.142.
 2. Mansfield Park, p.18.
 3. Sense and Sensibility, p.121.

She accepts the terms but not the judgment. The expressions "violent screams," and "as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy," contradict this image of gentleness, and the words "critical," "emergency," "agonies," "sufferer," are meant to be read with an eye on the slight scratch.

In the following description of John Dashwood, the author's first adjective is deliberately contradicted by her subsequent ones in order, I suggest, to draw our attention to the elusiveness of his fault:

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold-hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well-respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties ...¹

The antiphrasis forces us to re-assess John Dashwood's character. Both 'cold-hearted' and 'selfish' can be incorporated in the definition of "ill-disposed." An ill-disposed young man is certainly a young man with a heartless and unsympathetic disposition, and the "cold-hearted" and "rather selfish" John Dashwood is in the final analysis an ill-disposed young man.

Jane Austen uses antiphrasis more frequently in her early works but as her art matures, her irony gets subtler and she is able to achieve an effect by merely placing words or sentences in ironic juxtaposition. The deliberate juxtaposition of discordant ideas entertains the reader and keeps

1. p.5.

the novels within the boundaries of comedy. This is how Jane Austen describes the mutual attraction between Lady Middleton and Mrs. Fanny Dashwood:

Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of cold-hearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them; and they sympathised with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanour, and a general want of understanding. 1

There is incongruity in the suggestion that selfishness can be attractive; the emotional excitement which attraction between persons suggests clashes with "cold-heartedness" and shows up the similar peculiarities of the two women.

In the following description of Sir John and Lady Middleton, Jane Austen sets up a series of antitheses which appear to show how dissimilar they are in temperament and behaviour:

The house was large and handsome and the Middletons lived in a style of equal hospitality and elegance. The former was for Sir John's gratification, the latter for that of his lady. They were scarcely ever without some friends staying with them in the house, and they kept more company of every kind than any other family in the neighbourhood ... Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot, and she humoured her children; and these were their only resources. Lady Middleton had the advantage of being able to spoil her children all the year round, while Sir John's independent employments were in existence only half the time. Continual engagements at home and abroad, however, supplied all the deficiencies of nature and education; supported the good spirits of Sir John, and gave exercise to the good breeding of his wife. Lady Middleton piqued herself upon the elegance of her table and of all her domestic arrangements, and from this kind of vanity was her greatest enjoyment in any of their parties. But Sir John's satisfaction in society was much more real. 2

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1. p.229.
 2. p.32.

The juxtapositions are occasionally united in a single comment to show how strongly they resembled each other in a total want of talent and taste. After distinguishing between the pre-occupations of Sir John and Lady Middleton, Jane Austen comments: "... these were their only resources."

In Persuasion she exposes the emptiness of Elizabeth Elliot's way of life through a series of ironic juxtapositions:

Such were Elizabeth Elliot's sentiments and sensations; such the cares to alloy, the agitations to vary, the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of her scene of life - such the feelings to give interest to a long uneventful residence in one country circle ... 1

Before this authorial comment, Jane Austen has already given a lofty description of Elizabeth's reminiscence of her past life and has indicated its monotony and emptiness:

Thirteen years had seen her mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding and directing with a self-possession and decision which could never have given the idea of her being younger than she was. For thirteen revolving years had she been doing the honours, and laying down the domestic law at home, and leading the way to the chaise and four, and walking immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country. Thirteen winters' revolving frosts had seen her opening every ball of credit which a scanty neighbourhood afforded; and thirteen springs shewn their blossom as she travelled up to London with her father for a few weeks annual enjoyment of the great world. 2

The elegance and pomp of this description are suddenly undercut by the narrator's direct comment: "scanty neighbourhood,". The next direct comment (my first passage) sets up an antithesis

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1. Persuasion, p.9.
 2. pp.6-7.

between Elizabeth's view of her life and Jane Austen's judgment of it. "Sameness" acts on "elegance" and minimises it, and "nothingness" neutralises the effect of "prosperity."

In the following description of the feelings of Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe as they accidentally meet in Bath, incongruity is expressed in a sarcastic anti-climax:

Mrs. Allen immediately recognised the features of a former school fellow and intimate, whom she had seen only once since their respective marriages and that many years ago. Their joy on this meeting was very great, as well it might, since they had been contented to know nothing of each other for the last fifteen years. ¹

Occasionally the ironic juxtaposition merely pokes fun at a character or a situation. Such is the case, for instance, when after Sir Thomas has put Mr. Rushworth's ideas more elegantly, Rushworth is described as hardly knowing "what to do with so much meaning,"² or when the "busy idleness"³ of Bath is amusingly described in Northanger Abbey:

Everybody acquainted with Bath may remember the difficulties of crossing Cheap-Street at this point; it is indeed a street of so impertinent a nature, so unfortunately connected with the great London and Oxford roads, and the principal inn of the city, that a day never passes by in which parties of ladies, however important their business, whether in quest of pastry, millinery, or even (as in the present case) of young men, are not detained on one side or other by carriages, horsemen or carts. ³

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1. Northanger Abbey, pp.31-32.
 2. Mansfield Park, p.186.
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 3. Northanger Abbey, p.44.

Irony is sometimes implicit rather than explicit. Jane Austen is preoccupied with the possible contradiction of appearance and reality and she uses the ironic device of understatement to urge us to look beyond the surface of characters and situations. The following passage, for instance, is an ironically concealed indictment of the Bertram sisters and the society which humours them:

The Miss Bertrams were now fully established among the belles of the neighbourhood; and as they joined to beauty and brilliant acquirements, a manner naturally easy and carefully formed to general civility and obligingness, they possessed its favour as well as its admiration. Their vanity was in such good order that they seemed to be quite free from it, and gave themselves no airs; while the praise attending such behaviour, secured, and brought round by their aunt, served to strengthen them in believing they had no faults. 1

Jane Austen begins by giving what appear to be legitimate grounds for their popularity in the neighbourhood, but when she describes their manner as "carefully formed" to general civility and obligingness, she suggests a merely superficial and studied politeness, distinguishable perhaps from a humane consideration for people. Her next sentence points out the difference between what the Miss Bertrams really are and what they appear to be: "Their vanity was in such good order that they seemed to be quite free from it." This says more than meets the eye: the Miss Bertrams are vain, but they are in such careful control of their vanity that they succeed in

1. Mansfield Park, pp.34-35.

disguising it. Their vanity passes undetected because it is concealed under a veneer of civility, and the neighbourhood only judges by appearances. In the last section of the sentence, the praise and admiration they enjoy in the neighbourhood are ironically qualified by the statement that these are merely solicited by their aunt. Without using so many words Jane Austen has said a lot about the Bertram sisters, their aunt and their neighbourhood.

In her account of the Bingley sisters' attitude towards Jane Bennet, Jane Austen uses understatement for a similar effect:

Miss Bennet he [Darcy] acknowledged to be pretty, but she smiled too much. Mrs. Hurst and her sister allowed it to be so - but still they admired her and liked her, and pronounced her to be a sweet girl, and one whom they should not object to know more of. Miss Bennet was therefore established as a sweet girl, and their brother felt authorised by such commendation to think of her as he chose. 1

The passage says more about the Bingley sisters than about Jane Bennet. Their unqualified declaration of admiration and affection for Jane modulates into "they should not object ..." which exposes their condescension and patronage.

In the following description of the Musgroves, Jane Austen conceals a certain contempt for the modern outlook of the Musgrove girls:

1. Pride and Prejudice, pp.16-17.

The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother were in the old English style, and the young people in the new. Mr. & Mrs. Musgrove were a very good sort of people; friendly and hospitable, not much educated, and not at all elegant. Their children had more modern minds and manners. There was a numerous family; but the only two grown up, excepting Charles, were Henrietta and Louisa, young ladies of nineteen and twenty, who had brought from a school at Exeter all the usual stock of accomplishments, and were now, like thousands of other young ladies, living to be fashionable, happy and merry. Their dress had every advantage, their faces were rather pretty, their spirits extremely good, their manners unembarrassed and pleasant; they were of consequence at home, and favourites abroad. Anne always contemplated them as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; and envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters. 1

"Perhaps" quietly but clearly raises doubts as to whether their "alteration" is really an improvement of their situation. Their modern minds and manners contrast with the ordinariness of their parents' but these cannot be labelled "improvements" because their elegance merely consists in the usual stock of accomplishments acquired from school by thousands of other young ladies. The author compares their rather gaudy elegance with Anne's more cultivated mind, showing her own preference for Anne's kind of elegance but at the same time avoiding complacency by this disarming and reasonable comment: "Still

1. Persuasion, pp.40-41.

saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange. ..."¹

In this description of Mrs. Ferrars, the irony of understatement is slightly more caustic and wicked:

Mrs. Ferrars was a little, thin woman, upright, even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness, in her aspect. Her complexion was sallow; and her features small, without beauty, and naturally without expression; but a lucky contraction of the brow had rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving it the strong characters of pride and ill-nature. She was not a woman of many words: for, unlike people in general, she proportioned them to the number of her ideas; and of the few syllables that did escape her, not one fell to the share of Miss Dashwood, whom she eyed with the spirited determination of disliking her at all events. 2

The underlined words must not be taken at their face value, "lucky" for instance, is misleading. The contraction of Mrs. Ferrars' brow rescues her expression from insipidity only to give it the equally unattractive characters of pride and ill-nature, and the woman whose expression can be rescued from insipidity only to pride and ill-nature is indeed unlucky. The author appears to be commending Mrs. Ferrars when she says she was unlike other people in being able to proportion her words to her ideas, but she is actually expressing contempt, quietly but devastatingly suggesting that she had nothing to say, for even the few syllables she is able to utter merely "escape" her.

1. p.40.

2. Sense and Sensibility, p.232.

Jane Austen's management of point of view often yields other complex ironies. Consider the point of view in the following passage:

The night was stormy; the wind had been rising at intervals the whole afternoon; and by the time the party broke up, it blew and rained violently. Catherine, as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with sensations of awe: and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she was really in an Abbey. Yes, these were characteristic sounds; - they brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situations and horrid scenes, which such buildings had witnessed, and such storms ushered in ... Thus wisely fortifying her mind, as she proceeded up stairs, she was enabled, especially on perceiving that Miss Tilney slept only two doors from her, to enter her room with a tolerably stout heart; and her spirits were immediately assisted by the cheerful blaze of a wood fire. "How much better is this, ... how much better to find a fire ready lit, than ^{how} to wait shivering in the cold till all the family are in bed, as so many poor girls have been obliged to do. 1

Jane Austen begins by identifying with Catherine. She adopts the Gothic novelist's solemn tone and employs her vocabulary, describing the storm as a raging tempest and referring to Catherine's feelings as "sensations of awe." In the next sentence however she disassociates herself from Catherine's point of view and mocks her typically Gothic responses. It is Catherine, not the narrator, who calls the raging tempest "characteristic." In the sentence beginning "thus wisely fortifying her mind ..." the adjective "wisely" suggests authorial approval. Jane Austen again identifies with Catherine

1. Northanger Abbey, pp.166-167.

but detaches herself almost immediately and ridicules her reaction. When Catherine says "how much better is this," she is comparing the real world of Northanger Abbey with the fictional world of Gothic novels and revealing the confusion in her mind.

In the following passage Jane Austen deliberately assumes the point of view of Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny Dashwood in order to mock their pretensions:

His mother wished to interest him in political concerns, to get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day. Mrs. John Dashwood wished it likewise; but in the mean while, till one of these superior blessings could be attained, it would have quieted her ambition to see him driving a barouche. But Edward had no turn for great men or barouches. All his wishes centred in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life. Fortunately he had a younger brother who was more promising.¹

"Superior blessings," "fortunately," "promising," all seem to suggest Jane Austen's approval of their values but they are actually meant to be read ironically. Fanny Dashwood regards driving a barouche as just as good as going to Parliament, and has apparently only been anxious to see Edward distinguish himself in some ostentatious way. The "promising" younger brother is in such a context not a promising politician but a promising coxcomb.

Jane Austen recounts the following incident from Mrs. Dashwood's point of view but manoeuvres to get across her own judgment of the situation and of Mrs. Dashwood's character:

1. Sense and Sensibility, pp.15-16.

I come now to the relation of a misfortune, which about this time befell Mrs. John Dashwood. It so happened that while her two sisters with Mrs. Jennings were first calling on her in Harley Street, another of her acquaintance had dropped in - a circumstance in itself not apparently likely to produce evil to her. But while the imaginations of other people will carry them away to form wrong judgments of our conduct, and to decide on it by slight appearances, one's happiness must in some measure be always at the mercy of chance. In the present instance, this last-arrived lady allowed her fancy so far to outrun truth and probability, that on merely hearing the name of the Miss Dashwoods and understanding them to be Mr. Dashwood's sisters, she immediately concluded them to be staying at Harley Street; and the misconstruction produced within a day or two afterwards, cards of invitation for them as well as for their brother and sister, to a small musical party at her house. The consequence of which was, that Mrs. John Dashwood was obliged to submit not only to the exceedingly great inconvenience of sending her carriage for the Miss Dashwoods; but, what was still worse, must be subject to all the unpleasantness of appearing to treat them with attention: and who could tell that they might not expect to go out with her a second time? The power of disappointing them, it was true, must always be her's. But that was not enough; for when people are determined on a mode of conduct which they know to be wrong, they feel injured by the expectation of anything better from them. 1

It is the mock seriousness of the author's tone and the extravagant exaggeration of language which detach her from Mrs. Dashwood's point of view. "misfortune" for instance is misleading and should only be read with an eye on the circumstances it describes. Only a woman as mean as Mrs. John Dashwood would regard the simple act of taking her sisters to a party as "an exceedingly great inconvenience" and a "misfortune." In the very last part of the passage Jane Austen assumes an objective

1. pp.248-249.

point of view, one which sums up her judgment of Fanny Dashwood's conduct.

In Pride and Prejudice the author first gives a detached and objective account of the behaviour of Bingley and Darcy at the assembly ball:

Mr. Bingley had soon made himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room; he was lively and unreserved, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield. 1

Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined being introduced to any other lady, and spent the rest of the evening walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party. 2

She then appears to identify with the neighbourhood's appraisal of the two gentlemen, but actually condemns its hastiness and its bias:

Such amiable qualities must speak for themselves. What a contrast between (Mr. Bingley) and his friend ... (Mr. Darcy's) character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again. 3

The finality of "decided" contrasts with the duration of the neighbourhood's acquaintance with Darcy, and the superlatives "proudest," "most disagreeable," are both disproportionately used. This is clearly a hasty and biased judgment. Mr. Bingley's behaviour satisfies the neighbourhood's expectations and it immediately decides he is "amiable;" Mr. Darcy behaves

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1. Pride and Prejudice, p.10.
 2. p.10.
 3. p.11.

differently and it just as hastily condemns him. The process of judgment, Jane Austen suggests, is not as straightforward as the neighbourhood thinks. A simple character like Bingley may reveal himself after a short acquaintance, but a complex character may not be so transparent. His character can therefore only be "decided" after a long period of acquaintance and observation. This is a lesson which even the heroine must eventually learn.

Occasionally, Jane Austen assumes a partial objectivity in order to make a severe moral judgment. This passage from Mansfield Park is slightly more reproachful and depreciative.

They could not but hold her cheap on finding that she had but two sashes, and had never learnt French; and when they perceived her to be little struck with the duet they were so good as to play, they could do no more than make her a generous present of some of their least valued toys, and leave her to herself, while they adjourned to whatever might be the favourite holiday sport of the moment, making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper. 1

At first Jane Austen appears to share Maria and Julia's disgust with Fanny. "They could not but," "they could do no more," both imply that their reaction is natural and legitimate, but their reason for holding Fanny "cheap" cannot be supported by Jane Austen, for elsewhere in Mansfield Park she distinguishes between fine clothes, brilliant acquirements and "active

1. Mansfield Park, p.14.

principle."¹ In the second sentence "least valued" is a qualification of their kind of liberality, and "wasting" is a direct condemnation of their favourite pastime. By appearing to support their disparagement of Fanny, Jane Austen finally turns the tables on Maria and Julia and condemns them.

Related to Jane Austen's technique of partial objectivity is her tendency to express irony through general statements. Not all such general statements are ironical; most of them are in fact merely used to point out some common knowledge or experience. When in explaining Anne Elliot's pleasure at being still considered youthful at twenty eight, Jane Austen says "it is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth,"² she is merely asking us to forgive a natural and harmless gratification. She makes a similar reference to common experience when she explains the general good-natured interest that Mr. Elton's name excites in Highbury: "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting

1. At the end of the novel Sir Thomas himself accepts the superiority of "active principle": "He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments - the authorised object of their youth - could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind." Mansfield Park, p.463.

2. Persuasion, p.243.

situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of."¹

Occasionally however, Jane Austen ironically reverses a general statement in order to satirise. When for instance, she explains Lady Middleton's failure to see through the hypocrisy of the Miss Steeles, she appears to be referring to some general knowledge but is actually mocking an individual characteristic. This is how the statement reads:

Fortunately for those who pay their court through such foibles, a fond mother, though in pursuit of praise for her children, the most rapacious of human beings, is likewise the most credulous; her demands are exorbitant, but she will swallow anything. 2

The excesses of language act against this general statement. "most rapacious," "most credulous" and "swallow anything" are all hyperbolic. The image of the mother in pursuit of praise is also rather extravagant. The statement, playful in its generalisation about "a fond mother" applies to the particular case of the stupid and inane Lady Middleton or others like her.

The opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice is a generalisation which is ironically qualified by both authorial comment and dramatised conversation. Jane Austen uses "universally" in a rather restricted sense when she talks of the "universally" accepted truth "that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife,"³ for she rejects the

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1. Emma, p.181.
 2. Sense and Sensibility, p.120.
 3. Pride and Prejudice, p.3.

universality of this "truth" when she questions it in this oblique comment:

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well-fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. ¹

The suggestion that the single man with a large fortune can have feelings and views of his own, conflicts with the "truth," so well fixed in his neighbour's minds, that he must be in want of a wife. All the tensions that can result from such a way of thinking are suggested and one aspect of it dramatised in the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, in which Mr. Bingley's feelings are completely overshadowed by Mrs. Bennet's perception of the "truth":

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune, four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls."

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?" ²

Mr. Bennet's sensible and sarcastic retorts highlight the unreasonableness of Mrs. Bennet's assumptions and further qualifies the "universality" of the "truth." Jane Austen has narrowed down the generalisation, dissociated herself from it and used it to state her theme.

1. p.3.
2. pp.3-4.

Another characteristic of Jane Austen's comic voice is parody. In a very simple sense, this is mockery by imitation, and it seems to me to be more suited to pure satire than to Jane Austen's comedy. Not surprisingly, she uses it sparingly, and more often in the Juvenilia and Northanger Abbey than in the mature novels. In the Juvenilia we have direct parody of the type found in Frederick and Elfrida where Jane Austen amuses herself with and criticises the outlandish techniques and pompous diction of the sentimental novel. In the following passages she mimics the inflated rhetoric of sentimental novels by inserting words merely to create a solemn rhythm:

On being shewn into an elegant dressing room, ornamented with festoons of artificial flowers, they were struck with the engaging Exterior and beautiful outside of Jezalinda the eldest of the young ladies but e'er they had been many minutes seated, the Wit and Charms which shone resplendent in the conversation of the amiable Rebecca, enchanted them so much that they all with one accord jumped up and exclaimed ... 1

Scarcely were they seated as usual, in the most affectionate manner in one chair, than the Door suddenly opened and an aged gentleman with a sallow face and old pink Coat, partly by intention and partly thro' weakness, was at the feet of the lovely Charlotte, declaring his attachment to her and beseeching her pity in the most moving manner. 2

In the following description of Willoughby in Sense and Sensibility she deliberately parodies the Gothic novelist's extravagant description of character:

1. Minor Works, p.6.

2. p.8.

His manly beauty and more than common gracefulness were instantly the theme of general admiration, and the laugh which his gallantry raised against Marianne, received particular spirit from his exterior attractions - Marianne herself had seen less of his person than the rest, for the confusion which crimsoned over her face, on his lifting her up, had robbed her of the power of regarding him after their entering the house. 1

Later, Jane Austen contrasts the grandiloquence of Gothic diction with the commonplace subjects it often expresses. In her stylised beginning to Frederick and Elfrida she mimics and mocks the stock expressions of the sentimental novel, contrasting its precise phraseology with the absurdity of its subject matter: "The uncle of Elfrida was the father of Frederick; in other words they were first cousins by the father's side." In Jack and Alice she suddenly undercuts the cliché-ridden description of Miss Dickins with an anti-climatic ending:

Miss Dickins was an excellent Governess. She instructed me in the Paths of Virtue; under her tuition I daily became more amiable, and might perhaps by this time have nearly attained perfection, had not my worthy Preceptress been torn from my arms, e'er I had attained my seventeenth year. I never shall forget her last words. "My dear Kitty," she said, "Good night t'ye." "I never saw her afterwards" continued Lady Williams wiping her eyes, "she eloped with the Butler the same night." 2

And in Evelyn a young man's response when told there are no houses in the parish is couched in a disproportionately sentimental language:

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1. Sense and Sensibility, p.43.
 2. Minor Works, p.17.

He turned from [the landlady] in visible agitation. "What a situation am I in," said he to himself as he walked to the window and threw up the sash. He found himself revived by the air ... yet it was for a moment - the agonizing pain of doubt and suspense weighed down his spirits. 1

In this parody the author does not only mock Gothic sentimentality but also seriously questions its motives.

Occasionally, Jane Austen aims at frustrating the expectations of the reader himself. In Northanger Abbey she describes Mrs. Morland's reaction to Catherine's departure from Bath, imitating the inflated rhetoric, the rhythms and clichédiction of sentimental writing:

When the hour of departure drew near, the maternal anxiety of Mrs. Morland will be naturally supposed to be most severe. A thousand alarming presentiments of evil to her beloved Catherine from this terrific separation must oppress her heart with sadness, and drown her in tears for the last day or two of their being together; and advice of the most important and applicable nature must of course flow from her wise lips in their parting conference in her closet. Cautions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house, must, at such a moment, relieve the fulness of her heart. Who would not think so? 2

Then as if to dash the reader's expectations and prove her own novel is significantly different, she gives a straightforward unsentimental account of what actually happened:

But Mrs. Morland knew so little of lords and baronets, that she entertained no notion of their general mischievousness, and was wholly unsuspecting of danger to her daughter from their machinations. Her cautions

1. p, 180.

2. Northanger Abbey, p.18.

were confined to the following points. "I beg, Catherine, you will always wrap yourself up very warm about the throat, when you come from the Rooms at night; and I wish you would try to keep some account of the money you spend; - I will give you this little book on purpose." 1

When Catherine Morland is left without a partner in a ballroom at Bath, Jane Austen compares her reaction with those of other Gothic heroines:

To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity, her action all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character. Catherine had fortitude too; she suffered, but no murmur passed her lips. 2

The analogy is incongruous and the heightened language too heavy for the commonplace situation it parallels. Jane Austen is ridiculing the stock expectations of the novel reader and giving the comic and serious warning that her own novel has nothing to do with any conventional novelistic world.

1. pp.18-19.

2. p.53.

CHAPTER FIVE

SANDITON: A NEW STYLE OF COMEDY?

It is always dangerous to make judgments about an unfinished work and especially about a work like Sanditon which has only twelve chapters, was abandoned without a title and looks slightly different from the author's previous works. Perhaps it is for this reason that early critics of Jane Austen have been particularly cautious and tentative in their remarks about it. Dr. Chapman for instance, believes that from the width of the fragment's canvass and its leisurely procedure, it must have been planned on the scale of Emma and that the twelve chapters constitute only half of the first three volumes. If this is so then the twelve chapters are slender foundations indeed to build any interpretation on. But without being dogmatic, I want to point out certain tendencies to illustrate my belief that the fragment is the beginning of a new and interesting style of comedy.

When he commented on Sanditon in Abinger Harvest, E.M. Forster thought it of small literary merit and found it interesting only because of the light it throws on the last phase of the novelist:

In 1817 she had reached maturity, but she was also ill, and these are the two factors we must bear in mind while we read - Are there signs of new development in Sanditon or is everything over-shadowed by the approach of death? 1

He concluded that as far as character drawing is concerned there was nothing new, that Jane Austen was completely in the "grip of her characters."² He found the wit in Sanditon reminiscent as well but thought it faint and sometimes even stale. And surprisingly he quoted a rather uncharacteristic passage to illustrate the faintness of wit in Sanditon:

All that he understood of himself he readily told, for he was very open hearted; and where he might be himself in the dark, his conversation was still giving information to such of the Heywoods as could observe.

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It is the old flavour, but how faint! Sometimes it is even stale, and we realise with pain that we are listening to a slightly tiresome spinster, who has talked too much in the past to be silent unaided. 3

The only thing that Forster found new in Sanditon is atmosphere: "... there is a queer taste in these eleven chapters which is not easily defined; a double-flavoured taste -

1. E.M. Forster, "On Sanditon," Abinger Harvest (London, 1953), p.149.

2. p.149.

3. p.150.

half topography, half romance."¹ He recognised that Sanditon was not like Lyme or Highbury or Northanger and that its topography was "screwed much deeper than usual into the story" but he failed to find out why and concluded rather hastily that "it was clearly intended to influence the faded fabric of the story and govern its matrimonial weavings."²

Marvin Mudrick takes a closer look at Sanditon and notices several aspects of it. He recognises a difference in the treatment of the heroine for instance. The irony, he argues, does not depend on any "patent defect in the protagonist,"³ Charlotte Heywood being neither deluded nor overconfident but merely a neutral observer. This of course is not a new thing in Jane Austen. The heroines of Mansfield Park and Persuasion for instance, are not as strongly criticised as the heroines of the other novels. But Mudrick's recognition of Charlotte's new role does show at least that Sanditon is not a comedy of deception and undeception in the old style.

Like Forster, Mudrick notices the new interest in topography but asserts that it serves a unique purpose. He sees topography in addition to romance and sex as "elements of a compound entirely different and distinct in Jane Austen's work, a comedy of ambiguities, depending not on the ingeniousness (as in Northanger Abbey) or the partiality (as in Pride and

1. p.150.

2. p.180.

3. Mudrick, p.242.

Prejudice) or the indulged stubbornness (as in Emma) of the observer but on the ambiguities inherent in an unsettled place among a transient group."¹ He sees Jane Austen's new method as an expansion of perception and a widening of material.

In a much wider study of Jane Austen's manuscripts, Brian Southam makes numerous interesting observations on Sanditon. He states, contrary to Forster's view, that the fragment is the most vigorous of all Jane Austen's writing, showing not the least sign of fatigue in its style, invention or design and revealing the author responding as never before to the world around her. His examination of the revisions in the author's first draft is very valuable especially as it disagrees with Dr. Chapman's rather cautious view that "there is a certain roughness and harshness of satire about the first draft which would have been reduced in the final revision."² He recognises that the expressions in many passages are so energetic and elliptical that judged beside the earlier novels they wear the look of haste, but he discovers that the effect of Jane Austen's alterations show no sign of expansion or formalisation but rather strengthen the characteristic vigour and economy of her work. He concludes then that Jane Austen was not merely sketching a story but producing a draft which would only require minor

1. p.257.

2. R.W. Chapman, "On Sanditon," Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford, 1948), p.208.

changes to reach a final state. This positive view of Sanditon makes me a little more confident in my assertions about it.

Southam also mentions the treatment of place in Sanditon as an obvious originality and notes that there is a shift in emphasis from the individual in society to society itself. According to Southam, Jane Austen looks with irony not at individuals adjusting themselves to society's values but at society itself, at its inherent ambiguities:

In taking this setting - the neighbourhood of a fishing village cum-coastal resort - Jane Austen was choosing a location which epitomised certain dominant features of contemporary middle-class life, namely, its expansion, its restlessness, its pursuit of pleasure and elegance, its materialism, and its immorality. 1

My own view of Sanditon is nearer Southam's. I see for instance that in Sanditon there is no attempt as in Emma and the other novels, at creating a stable social order. We have no sense of a coherent system of values by which characters are judged. The village itself is described in detail but it is not its stability that is emphasised but its exciting new atmosphere. A certain romantic atmosphere is conveyed through the elaborate description of landscape. When they arrive in Sanditon, Charlotte Heywood and the Parkers walk through the village, and almost every aspect of landscape is described in detail: the woods and enclosures of Sanditon House, the

1. B.C. Southam, Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts: A Study of the Novelist's Development. (Oxford, 1940), p.104.

branch of the valley winding obliquely towards the sea and giving passage to an inconsiderable stream, the top of the houses among the groves of Sanditon House, the sands, the terraces, and finally Trafalgar House itself, standing on the most elevated spot on the Down and about a hundred yards from the brow of a steep but not very lofty cliff.

Jane Austen's attitude to the new scene is not entirely critical. In fact there are times when she responds warmly to its excitement. She has for instance a refreshing description of Charlotte Heywood looking down the venetian window of her apartment in Trafalgar House and finding amusement enough in "looking over the miscellaneous foreground of unfinished Buildings, waving Linen, and tops of Houses, to the Sea, dancing and sparkling in Sunshine and Freshness."¹ What Jane Austen seems to disapprove of and to regard satirically is the inordinate enthusiasm for change merely for its own sake. She regards some of the Sanditon projects with the same ironic smile that she contemplates the improvements in the Musgrove household. She gives a full description of Sanditon village pointing out with a somewhat crisp irony the superficiality of some of its new improvements:

The village contained little more than cottages but the spirit of the day had been caught, as Mr. P. observed with delight to Charlotte, and two or three of the best of them were smartened up with a white

1. Minor Works, p.384.

Curtain and "Lodgings to let." - And farther on, in the little Green court of an old farm House, two Females in elegant white were actually to be seen with their books and camp stools, - and in turning the corner of the Baker's shop, the sound of a Harp might be heard through the upper Casement.

Civilization, civilization indeed! - cried Mr. P. - delighted - Look my dear Mary - Look at William Heeley's windows - Blue shoes and nankin Boots! Who w^d have expected such a sight at a shoemaker's in old Sanditon! 1

"The spirit of the day had been caught," "two or three of the best [cottages] were smartened up." These are the clues to the author's criticism of the improvements in Sanditon. They are carried out to keep up with the new fashion. As Mr. Parker remarks "it was a most valuable proof of the increasing fashion of the place altogether."² For him, civilization merely consists in such superficial things as blue shoes and nankin boots. The author shows the folly of this sort of enthusiasm³ by the contrast she draws between Mr. Parker's old house and his new one. His old house, a very snug-looking place is moderate-sized, well fenced and planted and rich in garden, orchard and meadows. Mr. Parker himself talks about it with something of regret as he and Charlotte pass by it:

This is my old House - the house of my Forefathers - the house where I and all my Brothers and Sisters were born and bred - and where my own 3 eldest Children were born - where Mrs. P. and I lived till within the last 2 years - till our new House was finished - I am glad you are pleased with it - It is an honest old place. 3

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1. p.383.
 2. p.383.
 3. pp.389-380.

In contrast to the old house, Trafalgar House, for all its elegance, is a light building with only a small lawn and a very young plantation. Apart from the disadvantage of not having a garden, it suffers the inconvenience of exposure to the raging of storms. Mr. Parker tries to turn the inconvenience into an advantage: "We have all the Grandeur of the storm, with less real danger, because the wind meeting with nothing to oppose or confine it around our House, simply rages and passes on - while down in this Gutter - nothing is known of the state of the Air, below the Tops of the Trees."¹ But this is mere romantic enthusiasm. We are left in no doubt at all that the old House is more snug and certainly safer than the new House.

Apart from pointing out the superficiality behind the fashionable elegance of Sanditon, Jane Austen also looks with irony at some of its inherent ambiguities. At the beginning of the novel Mr. Parker talks effusively to Mr. Heywood about the popularity of Sanditon:

... everybody has heard of Sanditon, - the favourite for a young and rising Bathing-place, certainly the favourite spot of all that are to be found along the coast of Sussex; the most favoured by Nature, and promising to be the most chosen by Man. 2

Mr. Heywood replies with some scepticism:

1. p.381.
2. p.368.

... Every five years, one hears of some new place or other starting up by the Sea, and growing the fashion - How they can half of them be filled, is the wonder! 1

His comment is a prediction of just what happens in Sanditon. Every improvement carried out is done with an eye on lodgers. The cottages are smartened up to attract them. Mr. Parker contemplates building a crescent and naming it "Waterloo" to attract applications and is certain that "in a good season we sh^d have more applications than we could attend to."² From Mr. Parker's enthusiasm we expect Sanditon to be inundated with applications. Yet the only two we hear of are those sponsored by Diana Parker, and even these end up in some comic confusion. As the author remarks ironically:

Not all that the whole Parker race could say among themselves, c^d produce a happier catastrophe than that the Family from Surry and the Family from Camberwell were one and the same. 3

For all its improvements and its fashion, modern Sanditon has therefore to make do with the old faces: the Parkers, the Denhams and the insignificant new arrivals: Mrs. G, Miss Lambe and the Misses Beaufort who are "just such young Ladies as may be met with, in at least one family out of three, ..." ⁴ This absence of any steady flow of lodgers is a contrast to Mr. Parker's enthusiasm and optimism and portends, I suspect, an even major comic catastrophe: the collapse of the whole Sanditon enterprise.

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1. p.368.
 2. p.380.
 3. p.420.
 4. p.420.

The other ambiguity of Sanditon is its combination of romanticism and materialism. An aura of romanticism and sentimentality surrounds the whole Sanditon enterprise yet as Jane Austen points out, its projectors are motivated by very strong materialistic ambitions. At the beginning of the novel, Mr. Parker replies enthusiastically to Mr. Heywood's complaint that the growth of new towns is sure to raise prices and make the poor good for nothing:

It may apply to your large, overgrown Places, like Brighton, or Worthing, or East Bourne - but not to a small village like Sanditon; precluded by its size from experiencing any of the evils of Civilization, while the growth of the place, the Buildings, the Nursery Ground, the demand for everything, and the sure resort of the very best Company, those regular, steady, private Families of thorough Gentility and Character, who are a blessing everywhere, excite the industry of the Poor and diffuse comfort and improvement among them of every sort. 1

Mr. Parker's romantic optimism towards the enterprise contrasts with the cool, prudent and unromantic attitude of his coadjutor - Lady Denham who has a shrewd eye for what she can get out of people and an equally quick one for what others can get out of her: "I am not the Woman to help anybody blindfold. - I always take care to know what I am about and who I have to deal with, before I stir a finger - I do not think I was ever overreached in my life; ..."2 Her attitude to Sanditon is solely

1. p.368.

2. p.399.

materialistic. She has more anxiety and more fear of loss and a fiercer determination to exploit the lodgers. She hopes for instance that her nephew Sir Edward Denham might fall in love with and marry a very-well-to do lodger, perhaps even an heiress, and she talks to Charlotte of her hopes, using a strikingly materialistic jargon:

Families come after Families, but as far as I can learn, it is not one in a hundred of them that have any real Property, Landed or Funded. - An Income perhaps, but no Property. Clergymen may be, or Lawyers from Town, or Half pay officers or Widows with only a Jointure. And what good can such people do anybody? ¹

Her reaction to the prospect of West Indian lodgers is twofold. She immediately senses the benefits of such a prospect: the West Indians will bring in money and the boarding school family are likely to include some consumptive boarders who may need her asses milk. Then just as instinctively, she senses a disadvantage: the West Indians may raise prices by spending too much, and the boarders may ruin her furniture. The obvious contrast between the two projectors, and Mr. Parker's own delusions about Lady Denham's motives portend a clash of temperaments and perhaps a comedy of misunderstanding.

The other peculiarity of Sanditon which Jane Austen exploits for comedy is its eccentrics. Sanditon is almost entirely peopled by eccentrics. In fact this is the first time

that Jane Austen has given so much time and energy to minor comic characters. First, there is Mr. Parker, carefree, perpetually optimistic and undiscerning. Then there are the hypochondriac Parkers - Diana, Susan and Arthur, and finally Sir Edward Denham, the literary enthusiast. Each of these eccentrics occupies a particular portion of the fragment. Mr. Parker dominates the opening scene. His unbounding optimism shows itself when he converts the disadvantage of spraining an ankle to the good luck of having had an accident in the vicinity of a surgeon. At the beginning he is confident that the injury to his ankle is trifling but shortly afterwards has to admit the necessity of immediate medical attention. His attitude to Sanditon and to people in general is always coloured by this peculiar optimism and blind trust. Undeterred by Mr. Heywood's scepticism, he talks effusively about Sanditon, his boundless optimism reflected in the energy and gusto of his manner of speech:

Nature had marked it out - had spoken in most intelligible Characters - The finest, purest sea Breeze on the Coast - acknowledged to be so - Excellent Bathing - fine hard sand. 1

What in the name of Common Sense is to recommend* Brinshore? A most insalubrious Air - Roads proverbially detestable - Water Brackish beyond example, - impossible to get a good dish of Tea within 3 miles of the place. 2

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1. p.369.
 2. p.369.

Jane Austen takes great pains to show the unreliability of Mr. Parker's judgment. His evaluation of Lady Denham's character for instance is deliberately couched to raise our suspicion. As he recounts the circumstances leading to Clara Bereton's admission at Sanditon, the reported speech momentarily lures us into regarding it as his own critical appraisal of the circumstances but the uncritical tone of the account soon reveals it as a word by word repetition of what is presumably Lady Denham's own account:

After having avoided London for many years, principally on account of these very Cousins who are continually writing, inviting and tormenting her, and whom she was determined to keep at a distance, she had been obliged to go there last Michaelmas with the certainty of being detained at least a fortnight. - She had gone to an Hotel - living by her own account as prudently as possible, to defy the refuted expensiveness of such a home, and at the end of three Days calling for her Bill that she might judge of her state. Its amount was such as determined her on staying not another hour in the House, and she was preparing in all the anger and perturbation which a belief of very gross imposition there*, and an ignorance of where to go for better usage, to leave the Hotel at all hazards, when the Cousins, the politic and lucky Cousins, who seemed always to have a spy on her, introduced themselves at this important moment, and learning her situation, persuaded her to accept such a home for the rest of her stay as their humbler house in a very inferior part of London, Cd offer. - She went; was delighted with her welcome and the hospitality and attention she received from everybody - found her good cousins the B - beyond her expectation worthy people - and finally was impelled by a personal knowledge of their narrow income and pecuniary difficulties, to invite one of the girls of the family to pass the Winter with her. 1

1. pp.378-379.

Later the author gives two separate and independent opinions of Lady Denham which contrast with Sir Edward's. Charlotte Heywood's more perceptive eyes see Lady Denham not as a "Very good natured woman" but as "a thoroughly mean person," and Jane Austen herself, after referring to her as a "great lady" proceeds to qualify her 'greatness' in an incisive omniscient comment:

Lady D. was indeed a great Lady beyond the common wants of society - for she had many thousands a year to bequeath, and three distinct sets of people to be courted by; ... 1

But for all his blind optimism and lack of discernment, Jane Austen is only mildly critical of Mr. Parker. Her attitude towards him is one of good humoured tolerance, more like a teacher's amiable acceptance of a dull but favourite pupil.

Sir Edward Denham dominates the middle section of the fragment. Cast as the sentimental romantic he talks in some literary jargon about the sea and the sea-shore. His rhapsodic defence of Burns is full of big words and literary cliches:

His Genius and his Susceptibilities might lead him into some Aberrations - But who is perfect? It were Hyper-criticism, it were pseudo-philosophy to expect from the soul of high toned Genius, the grovellings of a common mind - the coruscations of Talent, elicited by impassioned feeling in the breast of Man, are perhaps incompatible with some of the prosaic Decencies of life; ... 2

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1. p.376.
 2. p.398.

Fancying himself a latter-day Lovelace, he plans a Lovelace-style seduction of Clara Bereton, and Jane Austen describes his deluded aspirations with mock seriousness:

Sir Edw:'s great object in life was to be seductive - With such personal advantages as he knew himself to possess, and such talents as he did also give himself credit for, he regarded it as his Duty. He felt that he was formed to be a dangerous Man - quite in the line of the Lovelaces - the very name of Sir Edward he thought, carried some degree of fascination with it ... it was Clara whom he meant to seduce - Her seduction was quite determined on - Her Situation in ev. way called for it. 1

Jane Austen emphasises the artificiality of his planned seduction, (consider for instance, the cosiness of 'quite' in the expression: "Her seduction was quite determined on) contrasting it with Lovelace's genuine desire for Clarissa Richardson's Lovelace rapes Clarissa because he genuinely desires her, but Sir Edward is shown as merely playing at 'seduction'. His relationship with Clara Bereton would most certainly have been elaborated upon and would have provided much material for the comedy of delusion.

The last section of the fragment is dominated by the hypochondriac Parkers. The author's delineation of them is carried out chiefly through the point of view of Charlotte Heywood whose view of them contradicts what Mr. Parker would have her believe. Charlotte sees the Parkers not as fragile people with "wretched healths" but as reasonably healthy people

who simply loved to fancy themselves ill. She discovers that apart from inventing odd complaints for themselves, they were also perpetually busying themselves on other people's account. Diana Parker's very manner of speech shows an urgent enthusiasm for managing other people's affairs. Consider for instance the personal note in this breathless account of her exertions on Mrs. G's behalf:

What was to be done? - I had a few moments indcision; - Whether to offer to write to you, or to Mrs. Whitby to secure them a House? - but neither pleased me. - I hate to employ others, when I am equal to act myself - and my conscience told me that this was an occasion which called for me. 1

Later, as she explains her actions to Charlotte, she points to her own keen sense of duty, taking great pains to suggest that she is particularly qualified because of her strength of mind to be useful to the less blessed beings of the world:

... my dear Miss Heywood, we are sent into this world to be as extensively useful as possible, and where some degree of strength of mind is given, it is not a feeble body which will excuse us - or incline us to excuse ourselves - The world is pretty much divided between the Weak of Mind and the Strong - between those who can act and those who cannot, and it is the bounden Duty of the Capable to let no opportunity of being useful escape them. 2

The author draws a comic contrast between her sense of activity and her actual ineffectualness when she reveals that for all her exertions on account of the two families, Miss Parker fails to discover until Miss G and her group actually arrive, that they are one and the same.

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1. p.409.
 2. p.410.

Would Jane Austen have been able to sustain this broad comedy of manners in a novel the length of Emma? In her previous novels she always kept her hero and heroine central and allowed her minor comic characters only as much independent vitality as distinguished them from the main characters in a relationship of contrast. Could she, in this novel, have kept the minor comic characters dominant without any damage to her hero and heroine? We cannot be certain that she would have done this, but on the other hand there are no other comic tendencies suggested. There are serious characters in the fragment but they are not particularly comic. Lady Denham for instance, is more sinister than comic, and although Charlotte Heywood's powers of judgment and discernment mature throughout the fragment she is not a comic heroine in the sense for instance, that Emma or Elizabeth Bennet is. Perhaps the fragment would have developed in various directions and afforded new material for the comedy of delusion. There is for instance no single unifying plot but rather various areas of possible plot development: the future of the Sanditon enterprise itself, the scramble for Lady Denham's property, Lady Denham's own plans for Sir Edward, Sir Edward's plans for Clara Bereton, Charlotte's relationship with the Parkers. No one can tell which area would have dominated the novel, but it seems clear from the trend of the fragment that Jane Austen is

no longer on the familiar comic ground, concentrating her attentions on the heroine's progress from self-deception and delusion to self-knowledge, but is dealing in a much broader and light-hearted way with the comedy of eccentricities.

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