



Godmersham Park, in the County of Kent.

Godmersham Hall, from Edward Hasted, *History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (1778–9), volume III. Reproduced by permission of The Centre for Kentish Studies, County Hall, Maidstone, Kent.

JANE AUSTEN

PRIDE
AND PREJUDICE

Edited by
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persuaded himself that it was the business of men to be 'strong and active', where the woman should be 'passive and weak'. One must exercise power and will, the other should offer up the least resistance to these.³³ One can hardly imagine Elizabeth consenting to a relationship on this basis with Darcy, or with anybody else. The heroine consistently rejects a role of passivity, and shows some impatience with her sister Jane's willingness to accept the dictates of society; she likewise feels amazement that her friend Charlotte is prepared to submit to a tedious life of bondage to the ineffable Collins.

Things become trickier when we try to assess Austen's direct exposure to the war of ideas which raged in her lifetime, as well as the degree to which this might inform a novel such as *Pride and Prejudice*. She did not grow up like Frances Burney in a cosmopolitan world of writers, musicians and artists; unlike Maria Edgeworth, she was not surrounded in her childhood by rationalists, idealists and progressive thinkers; and her formative experiences stood at a distance from those of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose ideas came to fruition in a milieu of radical thinkers. Jane lived in a bookish family, but not in the main an intellectual one: even her eldest brother James, a 'reading' man, left no clear record of his attitude towards most of the big issues of his time. None of this means that she passed a wholly sheltered life, oblivious to the ideological struggles which went on during her lifetime. Yet it does seem to be true that her preferred tastes lay in 'literature', as we understand that today: the novel, drama and to a slightly lesser extent poetry. She read books of travels: but the references in *Pride and Prejudice* suggest that she took more interest in William Gilpin's observations on particular scenery than in the elaborate body of aesthetic theory which grew up, partly in response to his famous *Tours*. An allusion to William Combe's *Dr Syntax* (see vol. 2, ch. 16, n.4 below) indicates that she may have responded most keenly to comic and parodic treatments of the subject, just as she mentions with affection the *Rejected Addresses* (1812) of Horace and James Smith, burlesquing the works

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: ou de l'éducation* (London, 1785), vol. 3, book 5.

of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Crabbe, Scott and Byron³⁴ – but she offered few tributes to most of these poets. Her unflinching rationality and her mordant sense of humour appear to have prevailed over any commitment to dogma and doctrine, at least outside the religious sphere. A sceptical observer of most forms of human pretension, she did not protect fashionable ideologues from the inroads of her caustic wit.

In her novels and elsewhere, Jane Austen seldom uses the vocabulary of the British Enlightenment, as found in the works of Hume, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith or Edward Gibbon. The specialised lexicon of these writings makes no appearance: key terms may occasionally be echoed, but with a different feel or tone. We can see this when Darcy writes to Elizabeth about Jane's reaction to the first signs of an interest in her on the part of Bingley: 'I remained convinced from the evening's scrutiny, that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment' (vol. 2, ch. 12). This last phrase means simply 'return of his feelings'. It avoids the particular connotations given to the word 'sentiment' in a work such as Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), where the expression refers specifically to an innate impulse towards such emotions as sympathy, benevolence, admiration or affection. Austen uses the word in the ordinary non-technical sense of a feeling, an immediate sensation of affection or sexual attraction. We can still conclude that she is working within more or less the same intellectual framework as the participants in the wider Enlightenment project, and that her mind-set resembles theirs in some relevant ways. But it would be wrong to claim, on the basis of textual evidence, that she intends to collaborate in the same debate, or to meet their arguments in the same discursive space. She was a novelist and we do her most serious art no service if we ask it to perform philosophic tasks in which she had little or no ascertainable interest, and which would not self-evidently enhance the scope or depth of that art.

³⁴ 24 January 1813, *Letters*, p. 199.

Some scholars have maintained that the novelist imbibed the radical ideas of the age more deeply than conventional wisdom allows.³⁵ However, other readers may feel that this approach presupposes an author more interested in abstract ideas, and more exposed to philosophic texts, than is wholly plausible. Obviously Jane Austen was a woman of the highest intelligence: but she did not pass her life among intellectuals, and could not have had ready access to all the key Enlightenment texts. Instead she had something most intellectuals palpably lack: the ability to dramatise ideas, and the narrative skill to secrete attitudes and beliefs within the shifts and reversals of an absorbing plot. To put it bluntly, she did not need to consult the *raisonneurs* of the high Enlightenment to acquire a sceptical attitude towards the professions of proud and pompous oligarchs, nor to learn from the Jacobins that the private life of individual citizens was constrained by the social forms imposed by culture and upbringing. These lessons she had been taught by her native wit, her observation and her immersion in the daily life of England around the turn of the century.

Certain strands of popular moralising enter the text only when parroted by the desperate would-be intellectual, Mary Bennet (see vol. 3, ch. 5, n. 9 below). In defining the outlook of *Pride and Prejudice* on the ideas of this time, Mary's character raises some difficulty. Many readers have felt that she gets unduly harsh treatment from her creator: not content with making poor Mary an ugly duckling among the bevy of Bennet swans, Austen endows her with limited insight and conventional views. Of course, to depict a girl as a failed intellectual is not in itself to deplore ambitions in this direction among young women generally: but it looks as if the novelist shared some of the attitudes of her age and her class. 'Accomplishments' were very well in their way, but not (it would seem) if a

³⁵ Thus Peter Knox-Shaw sees *Pride and Prejudice* as embodying 'a politics of the picturesque', stemming in part from the work of theorists such as Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight. Hunsford and Pemberley represent differing world views acted out in the treatment of courtship within the novel. See Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

young woman acquired them at the cost of ease, confidence, tact and nice deportment in a social situation.

The truly important basis for Austen's art lay in recent and contemporary fiction. She filched more than a title from Frances Burney's *Cecilia*, adapting certain traits of the novel's hero Mortimer Delvile, when she gave Darcy his pride in lineage and position, with a consequent reluctance to marry a heroine with less impressive social connections. More generally, she took over Burney's realistic appraisal of economic constraints, and her recognition of class as a problematic category, rather than the unquestioned *donnée* it had usually constituted in earlier novels. The last two novels of Burney bear less obvious resemblance to Austen's own practice, but she may also have made a joke about *Camilla* by way of a pencilled note at the back of her subscriber's copy.³⁶ She admired the works of Maria Edgeworth, but *Belinda* (1801) probably appeared too late to leave any impress on the earlier versions of *Pride and Prejudice*. In 1814 she wrote to her niece Anna, a budding writer, 'I have made up my mind to like no Novels really, but Miss Edgeworth's, Yours & my own'.³⁷ We should recall that novel reading was a collective activity in the household, where women could exchange impressions as they went along. In the remainder of the sentence just quoted, Jane describes the reactions of the wives of two of her brothers, both confusingly named Mary. Thus fiction supported a networking bond of women at home, a function which Austen probably designed novels like *Pride and Prejudice* to assist.

INNER CIRCLE

For Jane Austen, indeed, the primary support group consisted of her immediate family and a very few close friends. In particular she benefited from the encouragement of her parents, siblings, in-laws and cousins, joined as time went on by nephews and nieces who were moving towards adulthood. She belonged to no school and attached herself to no coterie. Moreover, she had very few firsthand

³⁶ Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 272.

³⁷ 28 September 1814, *Letters*, p. 278.

- 11 **group'd**: the high priest of the fashionable picturesque movement, William Gilpin, had laid it down that, in depicting cows, two and four both made for an awkward combination. He wrote, "Two will hardly combine. Three make a good group—either united—or when one is a little removed from the other two. If you increase the group beyond three; one or more, in proportion, must necessarily be a little detached" (*Observations*, vol. 2, p. 259). Three was the most truly picturesque, that, is the number which would achieve the most visually attractive effect, such as the classic landscape painters had chosen to produce. 'Group' was a word which came into the English language from French at the end of the seventeenth century, referring specifically to the disposition of figures within a painting.

CHAPTER II

- 1 **Miss Bennet**: this form of the name identifies Jane specifically, as the eldest daughter.
- 2 **work**: needlework. Like most genteel women of her day, JA had been brought up to occupy herself every day with such work. 'Much of the girls' time would have been devoted to learning how to sew and embroider neatly, and Jane became a "great adept" at satin-stitch in particular' (*Family Record*, p. 59). Dr John Gregory had told young women that the purpose of acquiring such accomplishments was 'not on account of the intrinsic value of all you can do with your hands, which is trifling', but to judge more perfectly 'of that kind of work'. He continued, 'Another principal end is to fill up, in a tolerably agreeable way, some of the solitary hours you must necessarily pass at home' (*A Father's Legacy*, p. 51). Mary Wollstonecraft gave short shrift to such a view of needlework: "This employment contracts [young girls'] faculties more than any other that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their persons' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792], p. 164). Lady Sarah Pennington recommended that girls should be skilled in embroidery and fancy needlework, but need not make their own clothes:

Plainwork (tho' no very polite Accomplishment) you must be so well vers'd in, as to be able to cut out, make, or mend your own Linen . . . I see no other [motive] that makes the practical part at

all necessary to any Lady; excepting, indeed, such a Narrowness of Fortune as admits not conveniently the keeping o an Abigail [maid], to whom such Exercises of the a needle much more properly appertain.

(*An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters: In a Letter to Miss Pennington* (London: Bristow, 1761), p. 42)

- 3 **white soup**: made from a variety of expensive ingredients, notably almonds, cream and egg-yolk.
- 4 **cards**: formal invitations. These were normally sent out well in advance (at least two or three weeks before a major event like Bingley's planned ball), and would request the favour of a reply. This response from the person invited was expected within a day or two.
- 5 **attitude**: the predominant sense then was posture, physical position.
- 6 **shade**: a less praiseworthy feature.

CHAPTER 12

- 1 **professions**: the word nicely covers both expression of genuine regret (as by Bingley) and insincere pretence of concern (as by Miss Bingley).
- 2 **even shook hands**: a mark of condescension, since it was the privilege of the one higher in social station (here Miss Bingley) to decide how ceremonious the leave-taking should be.
- 3 **thorough bass**: originally, a running bass accompaniment of figured bass in a music score. Later, by extension, "The method of indicating harmonies by a figured bass, or the art of playing from it; *loosely*, the science of harmony in general' (*OED*). Here presented as a comically recondite study, juxtaposed with the all-encompassing 'human nature'.
- 4 **flogged**: flogging was a normal part of military discipline and might involve a large number of lashes on the order of an officer. Here, the private's offence was probably not a very serious one.

CHAPTER 13

- 1 **the Right Honourable**: strictly redundant, but not incorrect, in referring to the daughter of an earl (her parentage entitles her to