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Introduction

I do not write for such dull elves
As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves
(*Letters*, 29 January, 1813, p. 298).[1]

'"It is really very well for a novel." – Such is the common cant.' Jane Austen's defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* brings together her abiding obsession with fiction and her deep dislike of the expression of unexamined fashionable opinion. But despite her spirited support of her fellow-novelists here, her letters and other family documents show that she by no means considered them innocent of certain kinds of 'cant' themselves; her trenchant criticisms of the novels that she discusses with Cassandra and other members of her family often identify stereotypical characters and events which she considered had no credible existence outside the accepted world of the contemporary novel; the denunciations 'unnatural', 'improbable', even 'absurd', appear frequently, occasionally applied even to novels she enjoyed. 'I do not like a Lover's speaking in the 3d person; – it is too much like the formal part of Lord Orville [the hero of Burney's *Evelina*], and I think it is not natural', she writes to her niece Anna in 1814, giving her advice on the writing of her own novel.[2] Other contemporary writers come in for stronger castigation. In Mary Brunton's *Self-control*, the heroine, a young lady of great strength of mind and unassailable virtue, is abducted by her dissolute lover and taken to Canada, where she only escapes his attentions by floating alone down a river in a convenient canoe. Austen sums it up thus: 'an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, everyday thing she ever does'.[3] Of Sarah Burney's *Clarentine*, a very popular and morally improving work, she

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More information

says: 'It is full of unnatural conduct & forced difficulties, without striking merit of any kind.'[4] 'Unnatural conduct' in a novel, especially if it was used to support the moral tendency of the work, she found deeply unsatisfying; she appears to have judged that writers of fiction had a duty to keep faith with readers – invention must tie in with what she thought they would recognise and to some extent share. This appears to have been her interpretation of that rather slippery eighteenth-century concept, 'nature' – that which is common to all human beings – which was closely related to her second stated requirement, 'probability'. There had been vigorous debate about fictional probability from the early years of the eighteenth century – the consensus from such theoretical studies as had taken place was that a work of fiction ought to combine a moral tendency with a credible scenario.[5] Without the moral the credibility might be dangerous, especially to young readers. They might want to imitate the 'bad' characters if they were not given clear guidance. Austen was surely aware of the currency of these ideas through her reading of Dr Johnson, especially of *Rambler* 4, but felt that the balance had been disastrously disturbed; she appears to have concluded that fiction was beginning to sell out to polemic; to prioritise didacticism of one kind or another; in short, to give way to 'cant'. This may have seemed particularly evident in the 1790s as the novel became the focus of a radical–conservative debate about morality in the wake of the French Revolution. What has been called 'the novel of crisis' developed, in which fiction was used as a site for moral and social debate.[6] As extreme examples of a numerous genre we might mention Mary Hays at the radical end of the scale, with her novel *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) in which she presents a woman attempting to take charge of her sexual destiny, and at the same time opens up current Godwinian theories of anarchism and the perfectability of man; and at the conservative end, Maria Edgeworth and Jane West, who both denounced the fashionable doctrines of high sensibility and radical politics (which nearly always went together) in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and in *A Tale of the Times* (1799).[7] The polarisation of aims led to a hardening of novelistic formulae. Certain stereotypes were collecting around the reading public's idea of the novel – the deluded female who reads too many novels, the model girl, the female rebel, the hero/guardian who has all the right answers, contrasting pairs of heroines, one right, the other disastrously wrong; most novels, whether politically conserva-

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Excerpt
More information

tive or radical, made use of some or all of these. Many conservative novels were strongly influenced by popular conduct manuals, such as Dr Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774). Jane West herself published two conduct books;[8] her novels are to a great extent fictional versions of these. Internal evidence from the novels makes clear that Austen knew the Gregory treatise, and she mentions Gisborne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) in one of her letters to Cassandra.[9] We also know a certain amount about the novels Jane and Cassandra read, but the comments which survive do not include allusion to radical writers like Wollstonecraft and Hays – perhaps Cassandra saw fit to exclude such comment in the reaction against late eighteenth-century feminism which gathered momentum in the first decades of the nineteenth. But it seems reasonably safe to assume that the whole Austen family, assiduous novel-readers as they were, were well acquainted with the literary scene in general. We know how Austen reacted to the more conservative writers like Mary Brunton; it is likely that fiction with the opposite purpose would have struck her very similarly. She set about a challenge to contemporary assumptions, attempting to free fiction from elements which she thought hampered its relationship with its readers – perhaps broke the illusion which she supposed a fiction-writer was trying to create. In making this effort she created a new kind of novel which put all her predecessors and contemporaries more or less in the shade and ensured that her work outlived theirs. The exact nature of this achievement and the reasons for it have been the subject of continuous debate for nearly two centuries.

From the first her apparent narrowness of range was regarded with somewhat surprised approval. Readers of the early nineteenth century were used to novels that offered them adventure of some kind – fictional experience of broad scenes and/or exciting events which were outside their personal knowledge but made plausible by the persuasive skill of the writer. Though Richardson is ostensibly writing about life below stairs, he does not pretend that Pamela's trials are what any maidservant might expect in the course of her duties, and his later imitators often vied with each other in the production of situations of intense misery and terror which few readers could expect to experience. The picaresque novel, including *Tom Jones*, is by definition full of action and intrigue. Novels of sensibility on the Mackenzie model existed to provoke pleasurable and often exaggerated anguish in their readers. Austen's scenes of

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(apparent) unrelieved domestic triviality were new, but they were also thought safe. Her earliest critics regarded with condescending favour her ability to be interesting without the artificial excitements and sensationalism that they associated with the novel of the period, and to be morally 'unexceptionable' into the bargain. This kind of novel, they thought, was unlikely to lead to enervating emotionalism and Lydia Languish-like fantasies among the 'fair readers' – thus far, Austen seemed to be conforming with received opinion. She had managed to exclude the moral dangers which Johnson had associated with excessive realism. 'We will detain our female friends no longer than to assure them', says the anonymous reviewer of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1812, after pronouncing favourably on the work in comparison with others of the genre, 'that they may peruse these volumes not only with satisfaction but with real benefits, for they may learn from them, if they please, many sober and salutary maxims for the conduct of life'.[10] Even Walter Scott, justifiably admired for his early and intelligent enthusiasm for Austen, from the first assumes the essential triviality of the genre itself – 'these light volumes', he says of novels in general, may 'beguile ... hours of languor and anxiety, of deserted age and solitary celibacy'. The sum of his encomium is that Austen beguiled her readers in a less harmful way than some of her more sensational and fantastic fellow-novelists. '... the youthful wanderer,' he adds, 'may return from his promenade to the ordinary business of life, without any chance of having his head turned by the recollection of the scene through which he has been wandering'. Though he clearly perceived that Austen had effected some significant change – 'she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality', he says, 'that we never miss the excitation which depends on a narrative of uncommon events' – he fails to identify it with any exactness.[11] Her fidelity to 'real life' and 'knowledge of the human heart' were consolations for the absence of the exalted models of human character which the century continued in theory to require from novels. Sometimes, though, the sober tranquillity and low-key humour failed to satisfy; a Mrs Guiton, or Guitton, possibly of Little Park Place, near Fareham, when asked for an opinion of *Emma*, responded succinctly: 'too natural to be interesting' (*MW* 437); and according to Mary Russell Mitford '[Austen] wants nothing but the *beau-idéal* of the female character to be a perfect novel-writer'.[12] For many of her admirers her excellence lay in the wisdom of her restriction of her fictional range to those

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Mary Waldron
Excerpt
More information

scenes likely to be familiar to a polite maiden lady without experience of the wider world – they were happy to dispense with the elevation of mankind in favour of the everyday-life moral which is always mentioned as an essential ingredient. Archbishop Whately can only justify the popularity of the novel at all in terms of its power to instruct, and admires Austen most for making her morality palatable, in contrast to Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More: 'The moral lessons of this lady's novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward ... they are not forced upon the reader'.[13]

The nineteenth century on the whole preferred this image, and it was given a good deal of authority by members of Austen's family. The 'Biographical Notice of the Author' by her brother, added to the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1817, established the picture of the Christian authoress, 'gentle Aunt Jane', which became so comfortingly familiar, and the quotation of her estimate of her own work in a letter to her nephew, James Edward, the 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory, on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour',[14] helped to consolidate an impression of a writer who had no strong views on anything above the petty doings of rather insignificant people. Occasional outbreaks of a more energetic engagement with the riddle of her popularity, such as George Henry Lewes's comments in the critical press and his full-length essay in 1859, did little to dissipate the impression of an acceptable, undisturbing lady author, whose work was exquisite and true to life, but – well – not quite, unfortunately, in the first rank. Lewes insisted on her artistic achievement, and begins his 1859 essay by describing her as 'an artist of the highest rank' but talks himself into innumerable qualifications, until he concludes with what must be the ultimate in faint praise: 'But, after all, miniatures are not frescoes, and her works are miniatures. Her place is among the Immortals; but the pedestal is erected in a quiet niche of the great temple.'[15] This hardly solved the problem of why she continued to be read when so many other eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers were falling out of favour. The publication of the *Memoir* in 1870[16] reinforced earlier estimates, and Richard Simpson's really appreciative essay of that year is riddled with apologies for her limitations and actually concludes with the words 'dear aunt Jane'.[17] This was more or less the critical position at the beginning of the twentieth century. So far

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Mary Waldron
Excerpt
More information

her apparent avoidance of the great serious issues of humanity had gained her work qualified approval. Simpson sets the tone with a Latin tag, 'Ne gladium tollas mulier' – 'Woman, bear not the sword.' The inference is that she very properly avoided the tumult of controversy and stayed in her correct sphere. The moral tendency of her work was taken for granted – it was conservative, single-minded and safe. Her only fault – if it could indeed be rated a fault – was the restriction of the range of her attention.

The twentieth century was to uncover difference excellences and a wider selection of faults and failings. 'Gentle Aunt Jane' disappeared from serious criticism (though she surfaces from time to time in the media), first of all in Reginald Farrer's ground-breaking estimate in 1917.[18] He was the first to see her as essentially an iconoclast: 'standing aloof from the world, she sees it, on the whole, as silly. She has no animosity for it; but she has no affection.' He sweeps away the earlier complaint that she ignored the 'vast anguish of her time' with the assertion that 'she was concerned only with the universal' and 'is coextensive with human nature', 'preaches no gospel, grinds no axe'. Such insights were startling and revealing, but they are accompanied by a new set of reservations. Farrer's assessment will not contain the whole *œuvre*; he has doubts about *Sense and Sensibility*, and dismisses *Mansfield Park* as an out-and-out fall from grace: '*Mansfield Park* is vitiated throughout by a radical dishonesty . . . Jane Austen is torn between the theory of what she ought to see, and the fact of what she does see.' His perception of Austen as somehow unable to sustain her own fictional principles was to become a typical feature of twentieth-century criticism which it is part of the aim of the present study to challenge. However, at this early date, Farrer's more open-minded approach to what he saw as Austen's somewhat distant and critical relationship with her society, combined with the close and sensitive reading of text later recommended by I. A. Richards and the 'New Critics', whose work became increasingly influential from the thirties onwards,[19] certainly encouraged new, more searching appraisal of the novels. These approaches, together with the publication and consequent increased accessibility of most of the surviving letters in 1932, made possible a rather less bland version of Austen – she began to present an altogether more serious problem for critics.

Austen studies became particularly central to a fresh critical approach associated with F. R. Leavis and his followers.[20] In their

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Mary Waldron
Excerpt
More information

general attack on what they saw as outmoded academic gentility, they sought to introduce greater rigour into the study of literature; their aims were not identical to those of the New Critics, though there was a similar emphasis on the importance of close reading. Leavis's main concerns were, however, historical and social. His formulation of the 'great tradition' excluded writing which did not, in his opinion, convey a sense of a continuing 'vigorous humane culture'. Jane Austen was one among the very few novelists of the past considered worthy of serious attention on these grounds. It was under his aegis, in the periodical *Scrutiny*, that the Austen of the *Memoir* received her *coup de grâce* in D. W. Harding's 'Regulated Hatred' (1940) which replaced the kindly if not quite elegant lady-writer with a sharply intelligent woman writing against the grain of the narrow society within which she was inevitably confined. His estimate includes much of the ironic humour in the texts of the novels which earlier critics had often touched upon, but dismissed as mere fun, wit, or whatever did not interfere too much with the overall picture. But he is quite clear that the ridicule to which Austen holds up establishment figures like clergymen does not constitute satire – 'She has none of the underlying didactic intention ordinarily attributed to the satirist. Her object is not missionary.'[21] Harding's essay was certainly a new departure, but his arrival is more in doubt. Rejecting satire he identifies Austen's acerbic humour as a kind of personal therapy: 'she was sensitive to [her society's] crudenesses and complacencies and knew that her real existence depended on resisting many of the values they implied. The novels gave her a way out of this dilemma.' This hardly engages in any positive way with what the novels *did* achieve. Other *Scrutiny* articles by Q. D. Leavis and her survey of fiction emphasise Austen's basic detachment from her society, but insist upon her continuing cultural relevance; they come to more constructive conclusions.[22]

Meanwhile the first really searching, thorough and immensely influential literary biography of Austen had appeared, that of Mary Lascelles, who, working at Oxford, was not part of the *Scrutiny* group.[23] Her critical aims and her strong reservations about nineteenth-century critics are summed up in her Preface: 'Is this perhaps a characteristic of that generation of critics, that they exclaim, with Jonson, "By God, 'tis good, and if you like't, you may", and carry entire conviction – but leave us at the exciting "how?" and "why?" of analysis?'

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Mary Waldron
Excerpt
More information

It was inevitable that the overall approval of critics such as the Leavises and Lascelles would produce a reaction. A substantial number of commentators in the forties saw Austen's novels as less than relevant to anything in modern life – indeed tied securely to the ethos of her times.[24] To some of these her novels were simply didactic, rather elaborate courtesy-books which partook of the Anglican Evangelical morality which was at its strongest during her writing life. Their moral purpose might be obliquely stated, but it was, many critics asserted, as present as in any of the more moralistic fiction of her time. They could perceive little of the challenge to contemporary mores identified by Harding.[25] This strain of criticism naturally centred upon *Mansfield Park*, but a certain reading of the other novels based on twentieth-century ideas of personal freedom seemed to these critics to reveal a recommendation of differing degrees of decorum and submission to the young female protagonists and to come to rather moralistic conclusions. The spell of the novels was often seen as nostalgia for a more settled and reliable moral and social scene thought to have existed during Austen's writing life. For some, especially Marxist critics seeking politically acceptable values from literature, the nostalgia was rather discreditable, based on what Arnold Kettle saw as her 'unquestioning acceptance of class society'; her failure to include the lower reaches of that society and its contemporary problems was seen by him and many others as restricting her moral vision.[26] This dismissal produced its own reaction – the emergence of what has been called the 'subversive' school of Austen criticism – studies which, building on Harding's in 1940, exposed a greater or lesser challenge to the values of her society. Almost invariably these analyses result in adverse criticism, particularly of the resolutions of the novels, which are often perceived as failures on the part of the novelist to face up to the implications of her irony in an accommodation to the moral and social status quo. In the criticism of the fifties, Marvin Mudrick's *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* stands out not only as a refreshing and astringent corrective to gentle-Janeism that is much more deeply analytical than Harding's, but also as a specific challenge to Q. D. Leavis's view of Austen as a universally involved but free spirit.[27] Mudrick's alternative picture of a writer constantly resorting to a defensive irony as an escape from confrontation with what she perceived as real evils is fascinating; but it is also curiously destructive. Every commentary, as he charts the development and

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refinement of the irony, identifies flaws and failures; one finishes the book with the perception that, in Mudrick's eyes at least, Austen never quite made it. The conclusion of *Sense and Sensibility* is 'too abrupt and half-hearted to convince' (p. 92); *Pride and Prejudice* is more successful, but only insofar as 'the flaw of an irrelevant defensiveness has almost vanished' (p. 126); 'the world of *Mansfield Park* fails to convince' (p. 180); *Persuasion* is in need of revision; only in *Sanditon* is her irony 'dynamic, changing or expanding *at last* [my italics] into an authentically unrestricted point of view'. In a swing away from the 'subversive' school A. Walton Litz in *Jane Austen: A Study of her Artistic Development* (1965) perceives Jane Austen as 'assum[ing] a universal and traditional moral standard' which was conventional and unsensational, and which her narratives uphold.[28] His chief interest lies in the way in which he sees her as developing the power to reconcile this standard with individual freedom. With this approach it is easier for him to admire the novels, but its developmental schema necessarily implies the presence of many 'flaws' – and in any case, he is unable to demonstrate that the development was even. He speaks of *Pride and Prejudice*, only the second novel to be published, as in a crucial way the peak of her achievement, 'a triumph not to be repeated', because it bears out his view of her objectives as a writer; *Mansfield Park* is a comparative failure because, he asserts, it does not produce the required synthesis of feeling and conventional morality. One is left with the inescapable suspicion that both Mudrick and Litz feel that Austen was capable of writing much better novels than she actually did; Mudrick seems almost to be suggesting that Austen's work would have been more effective *without* the irony; Litz blames her for falling short of a set of aims which were not necessarily hers. This latter approach became a dominating tendency in the criticism of the next decades. Its tone is indulgent but oddly patronising – yes, we all enjoy reading Jane Austen, but here are the reasons why she doesn't altogether deserve our praise. Academia needed to find seriousness in Austen's work; when they found it, they tended to find failure too. Survival, according to such critics, is not necessarily the same as success.

Litz's view was upheld and extended during the seventies at a time of much ideological confrontation which affected criticism generally and revived doubts such as those earlier voiced by Arnold Kettle. Post-structuralist critics particularly argued strongly that all engagement with literature involves some political attitude on the part of

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writer and reader. Q. D. Leavis's view of Austen as a universal free spirit, and indeed all New Critical and Leavisite interpretations based on close textual examination, were rejected by those following the most up-to-date critical directions, on the grounds that the exponents had utterly failed to free themselves of the academic and political narrowness that they had tried so hard to escape. But on the whole, Austen studies remained curiously unaffected by the abstractions of new theory; major Austen critics of the seventies began to take a different, though still historical, line from that of Leavis, mainly by confronting the very political bias that postmodern theorists found so objectionable. Acceptance of the essentially conservative nature of Austen's reaction to the world in which she found herself had its best-known expression in Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate* in 1971 and Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, published in 1975.[29] Again, having postulated an overarching tendency in the novels, these critics, particularly the latter, identify as failure the exceptions and departures from that tendency – in *Sense and Sensibility* Austen fails 'to get us to read her story with the necessary ethical detachment' because we tend to sympathise with Marianne, who is rebelling against the ethical system; and *Mansfield Park* is 'an artistic failure' because, in Fanny, Austen tries to merge the 'exemplary' with the 'suffering' heroine and does not, in Butler's view, succeed.

The 'conservative' picture presented by these critics, of Austen as the upholder of tradition at a time of great ideological ferment, did not satisfy certain feminists, who perceived a distinctly subversive vein in Austen's treatment of her male characters. However, a good deal of feminist criticism of the eighties reaches the conclusion that women novelists of the eighteenth century were by and large forced into acceptance of the literary and social norms of their society by a dominating and powerful patriarchy which would only tolerate them if they upheld the standards of the establishment. Austen's often ironic slant on male–female relations, and the undeniable shortcomings of male characters, did not seem to critics like Mary Poovey, in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, and Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, to go far enough to demonstrate her independence.[30] Two other feminist critics took up a very different position, one which has had a strong influence on the present study.[31] Margaret Kirkham, in *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction*, successfully and most interestingly places Jane Austen in the context

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