

‘I like *Pewter* too’: Jane Austen, books and money

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Bharat Tandon, in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Jul 2013, said: ‘It’s hard to read the subsequent romances without feeling the pressure of money, which becomes an invisible but powerful agency, almost a character in its own right. Austen was, in her time, one of the most elegantly hard-headed chroniclers of the pressures of money on women’. All Jane’s principal women characters suffer from financial restrictions, except Emma.

Money was important to Jane, as we see from her letters and novels. She says in a letter to Fanny Knight (30 Nov 1814) ‘but tho’ I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter* too’.¹ The wars with France especially had resulted in an unstable, changing economy in Britain, high taxes (there was even a tax on dogs), shifting agricultural models – it was all unsettling.. Marriage, a primary focus in Jane’s novels, frequently secured capital.²

There was a huge growth in literacy from 1780 to 1790³ which led to circulating and subscription libraries, begun in 1735. By 1801 there were 1,000 in England. Jane was a member of several as she moved around; for example she took subscriptions for Cassandra and herself to a new one, Mrs Martin’s at Basingstoke (*L*, p. 26, 18 Dec 1798). By 1800 most copies of novels were sold to circulating libraries which then became the authorities on taste and morality (viz Catherine Morland’s assumption of what went on at Northanger Abbey). Novels were generally in three-decker format and those three parts could be borrowed by three different people.

The circulating libraries held rubbish - ‘Mere trash of the common Circulating Library’ (Sir Edward Denham, *Sanditon*, ch. 8). Sir Walter Scott talked of ‘ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering-places and circulating libraries’.⁴ Current novels were provided. The other sort (not trash) like *Emma* were works ‘exalted and decorated by the higher exertions of genius’ (WS). Jane read anything and divided books into those for reading (sensation novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* etc.) and those for rereading (Johnson, Cowper). Jane writes of circulating libraries many times – Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* dashes off to find one when she visits her father in Portsmouth as there were no books in his house. Circulating libraries also sold ‘all the useless things in the world that could not be done without’ (*Sanditon*).

Visitors to fashionable places subscribed to the library as soon as they arrived which made the subscription books vital tools for reconnaissance. In such societies it was of prime importance to be aware of who was here. In *Sanditon* Mr Parker and Charlotte Heywood go to Mrs Whitby’s circulating library to look at the subscription book. Alas, Mr Parker ‘could not but feel that the List was not only without Distinction, but less numerous than he had hoped’.⁵

Reading aloud was a social activity but Mr Collins, on being asked to read aloud by Mr Bennet, ‘readily assented, and a book was produced; but on beholding it (for everything announced it to be from a circulating library) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels’. He preferred Dr Fordyce’s *Sermons*.⁶ (Book presented: Frederick Marryat, *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, by the Author of “Peter Simple”, “Jacob Faithful” &c. (London: Richard

Bentley, 1854) with the bookplate of the Castlwellan Reading Association, a well-thumbed copy in the common marbled board binding with the accession number stamped in gold on the spine. Bindings of books from circulating libraries were a giveaway which Mr Collins recognised. In *Emma*, Harriet says that Mr Martin reads the Agricultural Reports to himself but ‘sometimes of an evening he would read something aloud out of the *Elegant Extracts* – very entertaining’. (Book presented: *Elegant Extracts: being a Copious Selection of Instructive, Moral, and Entertaining Passages, from the Most Eminent Prose Writers*. Volume VI, Book XI. XII (London: printed for John Sharpe [1812]). The binding is cheap buff boards, another giveaway.)

Sense and Sensibility was published 1811 on commission, i.e. at the author’s expense: Jane paid for printing, a cheap binding and distribution, with a print run of 750, at 15 shillings.⁷ She gained a share of the profits after sale of so many copies. She had already tried the other model of publishing, i.e. selling the copyright to a printer on the understanding that he would produce the work. She had had *Susan* sold to Richard Crosby in 1803; nothing happened and Henry Austen arranged to buy back the copyright in 1816 for the same amount as it was sold, £10. Crosby was unaware that this ‘Lady’ was the author of three bestsellers. *Susan*, revised, was published posthumously as *Northanger Abbey*.

People’s incomes were widely known. A curate might earn £40 a year – would he spend three quarters of one of those on a novel? Jane said sorrowfully: ‘People are more ready to borrow & praise than to buy, which I cannot wonder at’ (*L*, p. 287, 30 Nov 1814). The first two chapters of *Sense and Sensibility* are all about money.

The title page states: *Sense and Sensibility* A Novel in Three Volumes by ‘A Lady’. This was common practice: 75% of novels published between 1770 and 1820 were by ‘A Lady’ or ‘A Young Lady’ – this was a period of female ascendancy till 1820. 80 new titles were published in 1811⁸ so Jane was fortunate in having two reviews. (Judith Umbach presented a play in 2011 to the Calgary Chapter of JASNA, ‘In their Words’, about what the critics had to say). ‘Particular commendation ... well written ... highly pleasing’, ‘an agreeable lounge’ but it ‘suffered from want of newness’ (*Critical Review*); ‘Pleasing & entertaining narrative’ ‘heavily didactic, based on conduct books’ (*British Critic*). But more important was the stir caused among the aristocracy: the Countess of Bessborough said: ‘It is a clever novel. They are full of it at Althorp...’⁹ This was important – Althorp is the seat of the Earls Spencer; the Countess of Bessborough, Henrietta Ponsonby, was the sister of the second Earl, a scholar and politician, who had the greatest library in the world (43,000 books).

The Spencers had been at Althorp for 555 years, were the cream of society and had great influence. (Princess Diana grew up and is buried at Althorp. The estate is now owned by her brother Charles, the 9th Earl). The Countess of Bessborough also reported that the royal family was reading *Sense and Sensibility*. And the assessment of influential people would pass down through their households to all those who could read, or be read to, below them. No wonder *Sense and Sensibility* sold out: Jane says in a letter to Frank ‘every copy of S&S is sold ... it has brought me £140 besides the copyright ... only makes me long for more’ (*L*, p. 217, 3 July 1813).

Success encouraged Jane to publish *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813: she called it ‘my own darling child’. Henry Austen had in the past been of great help in Jane’s efforts at publication; at this time, however, his wife, Eliza, was very ill and died shortly after the work was published. To save Henry trouble, Jane sold the copyright to Thomas Egerton, her publisher, for £110 (Jane wanted £150 ‘but we could not both be pleased’ she says in a letter to Martha Lloyd, *L*, p. 197, 29 Nov. 1812). As was the custom, *Pride and Prejudice* had as author, not ‘A Lady’, but ‘By the Author of “Sense and Sensibility”’. The *British Critic*, the *Critical Review*, the *New Review* all published good reviews (‘very far superior to almost all the publications of the kind which have lately come before us’, ‘great spirit ... vigour’, Mr Collins as a ‘prolix prosing species of prig’).¹⁰ *Pride and Prejudice* became the fashionable novel for spring 1813 – all the people who mattered were talking about it and guessing who the author was. Books, prints and magazines had become fashionable objects for the houses of the propertied class.

Mansfield Park, ‘By the author of “Sense and Sensibility” and “Pride and Prejudice”’, was published on commission in spring 1814, was not reviewed but it sold steadily, the first edition of 1,250 copies selling out by November 1814 – and bringing Jane £350 (a small fortune).¹¹

Emma, ‘By the Author of *Pride and Prejudice* &c. &c.’ was published in 1815, 3 v. at 1 guinea (21 shillings) at Jane’s expense. 2,000 copies were printed of which 593 were remaindered in 1820 as they had not sold.

For *Emma*, Jane moved from Egerton as publisher (possibly because he would not publish a second edition of *Mansfield Park*) to John Murray, a very reputable successful publisher (firm founded in 1768 by his father, bookseller and stationer).¹² She refused his offer of £450 for the copyrights of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, lost so much by his second edition of *Mansfield Park* (which did not sell), as he set the profit for the one against the losses for the other, that she only gained £39 from *Emma*.¹³ Murray wrote to Sir Walter Scott, whom he also published though his *Waverley* novels were published anonymously, asking him to write a review: ‘Have you any fancy to dash off an article on *Emma*? – it wants incident & romance & imagination – does it not – none of the author’s other novels have been noticed [not in the *Quarterly Review* founded in 1809 which Murray owned] and surely P&P merits high consideration’.¹⁴ So Scott dashed off 5,000 words, mostly on the changing nature of the novel (though he paid new trends no attention in his own novels). He critiques *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, seems unaware of *Mansfield Park* and although complimentary (generally) he flounders about with *Emma*:

‘*Emma* has even less story than either of the preceding novels’ (*S&S* and *P&P*). After describing the characters in a fairly humorous way, he introduces *Emma*:

Miss Woodhouse walks forth, the princess paramount, superior to all her companions in wit, beauty, fortune, and accomplishments, doated upon by her father and the Westons, admired, and almost worshipped by the more humble companions of the whist table.

But he does admit that Jane produced ‘sketches of ... spirit and originality’ with ‘a quiet yet comic dialogue’, ‘pure delight’. Jane’s use of irony had not yet been realised.

There were eight unsigned reviews March – October 1816: ‘amusing, inoffensive & well-principled novel’, ‘distinguished degree of eminence’ in the ‘very highest class of modern Novels’, ‘amusing if not instructive’, ‘remarkable sameness in the productions of this author’, ‘easy, unaffected and fluent style’, Mr Woodhouse’s ‘drivelling mind’, Mrs Elton as ‘wealth struggling after taste & fashion’ (*The Champion*, 31 March 1816), ‘remarkable sameness’ in Jane’s novels, ‘less talk & more work’ needed (*Augustan Review*, 2.5., 1816), *The British Ladies Magazine* ranks *Emma* below *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* and complains that the ‘weak, gabbling country spinster’ (Miss Bates) is just too much.

The unities of time and place are noted in two reviews, and microcosmic home spaces appreciated.¹⁵

Jane says to Anna Austen: ‘I have made up my mind to like no novels really, but Miss Edgeworth’s, yours & my own’ (*L*, p. 278, 28 Sept 1814).

Maria Edgeworth was an eminent Anglo-Irish author who put her name on her books and Jane sent her a copy of *Emma*. Edgeworth, bewildered by the placid domesticity of the setting, comments:

there was no story in it, except that Miss Emma found that the man whom she designed for Harriet's lover was an admirer of her own – & he was affronted at being refused by Emma & Harriet wore the willow [heartbroken over a lover – ‘All round my hat I will wear a green willow’ (English folk song)] – and *smooth, thin water-gruel* is according to Emma's father's opinion a very good thing & it is very difficult to make a cook understand what you mean by *smooth, thin water-gruel*!!¹⁶

This copy of *Emma* was auctioned at Sotheby’s in December 2010 and realised £79,250.

Money in *Emma*

In misunderstanding and bad judgement Emma flounders about. She learns in the end that a person’s chief motivation may be money, not love. At the time agricultural labourers’ wages fell, there were bad harvests and food riots, the countryside was impoverished – hence the begging gypsies and poultry thieves.

Unlike Jane’s other novels, *Emma* is about people who work: Mr Knightley is a gentleman farmer, his brother a lawyer, Mrs Goddard runs a boarding school, Mr Elton is a clergyman, Miss Taylor was a governess, Mr Weston a retired merchant, Robert Martin a tenant farmer; or are about to work, Miss Fairfax.

Miss Taylor had to please the fussy old man and the wilful daughter on maybe £25 a year. Why would she even want independence from the Woodhouses and from poverty? Emma and Mr Woodhouse cannot understand that.¹⁷

Harriet’s insecure situation, as illegitimate (a social stigma) with no skills, no education, no legal rights and no money does not occur to Emma.¹⁸

Mr Elton is always on the lookout for free meals and on the make: he wished to marry the rich Emma but was unsuccessful; he married Miss Hawkins, daughter of a Bristol merchant (i.e

possibly involved in the slave trade), who was supposed to have £20,000, but only has £10,000. Mrs Elton talks on and on about her household, stressing the excesses.

Mr Knightley does not own a carriage, but offers Miss Bates a ride when he hires one. He is a benevolent landowner, concerned about his tenants, but has to watch his money.

Expenses weigh heavily on Miss Bates. She and her mother live on maybe £100 p.a. Miss Fairfax hardly eats anything to save on costs. Miss Bates is so kind and nice that she gets help from everyone – apples from Mr Knightley, pork from Emma etc. – she thanks them with ‘dreadful gratitude’ – and she shares her gifts. ‘If she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it’ – says Emma.¹⁹ Mr Weston says she ‘is a standing lesson of how to be happy’ (*E*, p. 210). But Miss Bates is clear-sighted and understanding (‘What is before me, I see’ (*E*, p. 146)) whereas Emma looks through veils of prejudice.²⁰

‘A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else.’ (*E*, p. 73)

Perhaps Jane was reflecting on what might happen to her, Cassandra and Mrs Austen in the Bateses. Their household, like the Bateses’, had suffered a come down – though with donations from Jane’s brothers they were partly insulated against extreme poverty.

Emma visits the poor – but the way Jane tells it suggests that here is Lady Bountiful dispensing alms.

Frank Churchill, spoiled and rich, like Emma with no understanding of having to do without, reveals his attitude: ‘It is very difficult for the prosperous to be humble’ (*E*, p. 358).²¹

Conclusion

Jane, having written money and financial stresses into all her novels and many of her letters (Mrs Austen ‘picked her old silk pelisse to pieces’ to be dyed black and made into a mourning gown (*L*, p. 143, 7 October 1808)) sums it all up:

‘Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. – It is not fair. – He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths. – I do not like him, & do not mean to like *Waverley* if I can help it – but fear I must’ (*L*, p. 277, 28 September 1814 to Fanny Knight).

Notes

¹ *Jane Austen’s Letters*, collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 287; hereafter *L*.

² Edward Copeland, ‘Money’ in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 317.

³ Alan Richardson, ‘Reading Practices’ in Todd, p. 297.

⁴ ‘Sir Walter Scott on Jane Austen: *Emma; a Novel*. By the Author of *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*, etc. 3 vols. 12mo. (London. 1815)’, *The Quarterly Review*, October 1815; hereafter WS.

⁵ Lee Erickson, ‘The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 30.4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1990), pp. 573-590; <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/450560>> (accessed 18 March 2017).

⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), p. 62.

⁷ James Raven, ‘Book Production’ in Todd, pp. 194-203, p. 197.

⁸ Raven, pp. 196-7.

⁹ William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: a Family Record*, rev. by Deirdre Le Faye (New York: Konecky, 1989), p. 168.

¹⁰ Austen-Leigh, pp. 174-5.

¹¹ Austen-Leigh, p. 189.

¹² Austen-Leigh, p. 201.

¹³ Jan Fergus, ‘Biography’ in Todd, p. 10.

¹⁴ [NLS MS 3886 \(ff 261-2\)](#).

¹⁵ Mary Waldron, ‘Critical Responses, Early’ in Todd, p. 88.

¹⁶ Quoted in Austen-Leigh, p. 208.

¹⁷ Sheryl Bonar Craig, ‘“The Value of a Good Income”: Money in *Emma*’, *Persuasions Online*, 22.1, Winter 2001.

¹⁸ Craig, ‘“The Value of a Good Income”’.

¹⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 74; hereafter *E*.

²⁰ Craig, ‘“The Value of a Good Income”’.

²¹ Craig, ‘“The Value of a Good Income”’.

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