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BACHELOR THESIS

MARRIAGE AND CLASS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

Supervisor of the BA thesis: doc. PhDr. Ladislav Nagy, Ph.D.

Author of the BA thesis: Veronika Grant

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## **Anotace**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá problematikou v románech Jane Austen, postavením žen ve společnosti a konvencemi a jejich vlivem na význam lásky a manželství. Cílem této práce je poukázat na to, jaký vliv měla společenská hierarchie na společnost a jak tehdejší konvence ovlivňovaly chování lidí ve společnosti. Tato bakalářská práce bude rozdělena do čtyř částí, kdy první část bude věnována úvodu do celkového kontextu, který nás seznámí s georgiánskou společností, životem Jane Austen a jaký vliv to vše mělo na její práci. Druhá část se bude zabývat morálkou a chováním v rámci společenských tříd a konvencí a třetí a čtvrtá část se zaměří na konkrétní problematiku lásky a manželství a jejich ekonomické benefity.

**Klíčová slova:** Jane Austen, Georgiánské období, společenská třída, konvence, námluvy, manželství, literární kontext

## **Annotation**

This bachelor thesis deals with those issues pursued by Jane Austen in her novels, this being the plight of women upon the then social classes and conventions and their influence on the importance of love and marriage. The aim of the thesis is to show what impact social hierarchy had on society and how these conventions influenced one's manner. The thesis will be divided into four parts, with the first part being dedicated to the introduction that is to bring us into the overall concept of Regency society, Jane Austen's life and the influence it had on her work, the second part tackling the issue of Morals and Behaviour within the Matter of Social Classes and Conventions and the third and fourth parts focusing on the particular issue of love and marriage and its economic benefits.

Key words: Jane Austen, Regency era, social class, conventions, courtship, marriage, literary context

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## **Preface**

Jane Austen has been lodged in the memories of millions of people throughout the world for years through some of her amazing pieces of work that, to a layman's eye, mostly tackle the topic of love and marriage. But as there lies so much more behind her stories she certainly deserves our undivided attention in order to describe and bring more light into the issues pursued in her novels, this being the plight of women upon the then social classes and conventions and their influence on the importance of love and marriage. The thesis will be divided into four parts, with the first part being dedicated to the introduction that is to bring us into the overall concept of Jane Austen's life and the influence it had on her work.

The introduction is an essential part of the thesis for it provides us with all necessary information needed in order to be able to understand the thinking and actions of people of different social standings in the Regency Era and Jane Austen's personal experience with life during that period. Whilst her novels provide only slight allusions to the historical events of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is important to be aware of the turbulent times that Regency society had to endure for us to comprehend Austen's characters, the importance of their professions as well as the professions of her own brothers and the changes that occurred within society due to these events. Events that brought changes to many regardless of their rank.

The second part will discuss morals and behaviour within the matter of social classes and conventions with an initial introduction to the overall features of Regency society and its social classes, from those lower on the social scale through middle classes to nobility. It is to deal with social events that were common to those in question and the way both men and women of Regency society were required to behave in order to keep to the conventions of the time.

The third part is dedicated to the principles of marriage at Jane Austen's time and the virtues of love and romance. The romance of courtship that was crushed by a number of rules governing the process, forbidding any kind of intimate contact. It is to provide us with a picture of the rules restricting one's behaviour, conversation and displaying of emotions to a minimum, the picture of a relationship that led to a simple wedding ceremony participated by only a few closest members of family and friends. Whilst tackling the issue of love and romance, it is essential to also look into Jane Austen's own love life, which is undoubtedly to help us to perceive clearly her attitude to the issue portrayed in one and each of her novels.

And the fourth and last part attends to the pursuit and economics of marriage, an institution that should be based on love and affection but whilst society changed radically, the

concept of arranged marriages prevailed within the upper classes that Jane Austen often refers to. This chapter is to portray marriage as a mercenary alliance that is to protect one's rank and finances in the case of upper classes and, on the other hand, to relieve middle class families of the burden of unmarried females who were assumed to learn to love, or at least to respect and tolerate those husbands chosen for them.

All aforementioned issues will also be portrayed by particular characters from Jane Austen's novels and the reality of her life alone. The reality of her own personal conduct, fortunes and misfortunes and the reality of her closest family and friends, all of which certainly had a significant influence on the creating of her powerful characters and served as motivation for the depiction of then society and living standards in a witty and ironic way that is so characteristic for Austen's writing. For once you become acquainted with Jane Austen's own life you can also become better acquainted with her work and characters and the real meaning behind her unforgettable and memorable words. And my intention is to do just that, not only to provide you with all the necessary information needed in order to understand this turbulent era and thus to convey the importance of social classes and the economics of marriage which is frequently showed throughout Jane Austen's work, but also to show that whilst Jane alone was mocking it in her work, it also had an important effect on her personal life.

## 1. Introduction to the context

### 1.1. The Author

#### 1.1.1. Birth and Family Life

*'I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!'* Pride and Prejudice (1813)

And it is true that Jane Austen's books have been delighting us for more than two hundred years, her heroes and heroines entertaining generations with her sharpness and wit. However, it is not only the virtues of love, love triangles and friendships that she tries to convey, for her novels and other works go much deeper giving us the overall picture of the then historical background, society, and its hypocrisy.

Having been born in 1775 in Hampshire, England, to Reverend George Austen, a clergyman from an old and respected family, and Cassandra Leigh, a scholarly and genteel daughter of a rector, it does not come as a surprise that Jane Austen was not only 'deeply religious' but was also brought up 'in a cultured environment'.<sup>1</sup> Accompanied with the fact of growing up with one sister and six brothers to whom she was very close as well as boys boarding at their house whilst being educated by her father, she spent most of her childhood in a happy environment full of fun and laughter, enjoying boisterous humour, party games and story-telling, all of these instances having immense influence on her future writing.

Her close relationship and love to her family might be surprising after her being sent to be nursed by a nearby farmer's wife when only a few months old. Still, however cruel this may seem, Jane, as well as all her siblings who experienced the same treatment in their infancy, did not languish for her family's love and affection. She did not return to her home until she was two or three years old but was, in all those years, frequently visited by her parents. Moreover, George Austen was an affectionate man and loved his family dearly and whilst her mother Cassandra was often worried about problems falling onto the family, she also was of a cheerful nature. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that her relationship to her mother lacked warmth and it was Jane's sister Cassandra, who she, on the other hand, loved dearly and in whom she saw both as her sister and best friend. Cassandra was the one whom Jane virtually never parted for the whole of her life and when Jane died, Cassandra said: *'She*

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Collins, Jane Austen, The Parson's Daughter p. XV

*was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow. I had not a thought concealed from her, and it is as if I had lost part of myself.*<sup>2</sup>

### **1.1.2. Education – Reading and Learning**

Thanks to George Austen's own learning, for he was Oxford educated, and his wife's family prominent connections, Jane's father not only provided all his sons with education enabling them to enter gentlemanly professions but also allowed his two daughters good education at home as well as at boarding schools. Jane's formal education, however, commenced when she was seven and was sent with her older sister Cassandra to Mrs Cawley's school in Oxford. One of the reasons for this was the shortage of space at the parsonage when the boarding boys were there and the other as her father had no time to fully attend to the girls' education separately, outside the boys' classes. Three years later, they were then sent to Abbey School in Reading, together again, for 'she would have been miserable without her sister; her mother observing that: if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite attempts to educate his daughters in an adequate manner, Jane happened to find herself better educated than the gentry she was admitted to, which allowed her to move in the same appropriate circles her mother came from and it was indeed the intention to actually make them fit for clergymen's wives. They were taught household skills that would make them equipped with all the managerial proficiency necessary to run a household and control servants, their manners and interests were cultivated in order to be able to mingle with the gentry and acquire social graces and their minds were broadened by substantial conversation, which was a highly prized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and reading.

Nevertheless, it was Mr. Austen's extensive bookcase numbering, towards the end of his life some five hundred volumes of classical works that provided Jane with the knowledge of events she possessed and endowed her with her love of books. Reading was, for some, considered an important part of education and Jane Austen alone believed it the best kind of education to have in combination with the possibility to further discuss readings with others, hence the importance of conversation. The Austens were all avid readers and her favourite

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<sup>2</sup> Holly Ivins, *The Jane Austen Pocket Bible*, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 18

brother Henry remembered that Jane learnt to read at a very young age, and it didn't take long before she started reading her own work to the family.

### **1.1.3. Jane Austen's Life Geography**

Whilst starting at a small parish in Deane, which was not adequate for a couple planning a family or aspiring to gentility, George and Cassandra, however, brought their first three children there. Nevertheless, once their new, yet humble abode in Steventon was renovated, the family was happy to move there and make it a comfortable and snug home. Whilst the parish was of a modest nature, Steventon was the one and only home Jane loved and was heartbroken when the family was forced to leave it.

Why George suddenly decided to move his family has since been deemed uncertain but the most frequent speculations suggest that, firstly, after having have been meeting his ecclesiastical obligations he was, at seventy, prepared to retire and secondly it might have been a scheme as to how to withdraw Jane from undesirable love and perhaps to find her a husband in Bath for Bath was, at that time, the town sought after for its spas and abundance of social events where one could encounter the 'right' society and thus to encourage their daughters in a hunt for the right potential and eligible suitor. Nevertheless, for Jane, Bath was a place of *'vapour, shadow, smoke and confusion'*.<sup>4</sup> and even though she enjoyed a busy social life, dances, theatres and trips to the seaside, nothing would compare to the open English countryside she had grown up in and for which she longed.

Whilst the first move was initiated by Jane's father for any of the aforementioned reasons or even different ones entirely, the next moves were the results of their distressful financial situation after her father's death. And as social security as we know it today was not yet available, widowed and unmarried females often found themselves in undesirable circumstances of either facing impoverished widowhood/spinsterhood or to become a burden on their sons and brothers and/or other members of their close and/or distant families. So, after spending the next three years in Southampton and Godmersham living with Jane's brothers, Frank and Edward, and their families. However, it wasn't until 1808 when Edward offered his mother and sisters a cottage situated within the grounds of his estate in the

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Cassandra Austen. Bath, 5–6 May 1801

picturesque village of Chawton near Steventon, where Jane once again found happiness and a passion for writing, for here it was where ‘she found a real home amongst her own people’.<sup>5</sup>

## **1.2. Regency Period (Georgian Era)**

### **1.2.1. Introduction to the Regency Era**

The Georgian era, the period between 1714 and cca 1830-1837, was an era named after the kings of Hanover, yet it is mostly regarded as its sub-period, the Regency era, defined by the regency of George IV, Prince of Wales<sup>6</sup>, who officially assumed the throne in 1811, the formal beginning of the Regency era, after having held the status of Prince Regent for nine years. It was an era where politics played an important role in all historical events that took place then, including the emergence of the new Whig and Tory parties whose revival was the result of profound political issues and arising controversies over the then upheaval such as the beginnings of the industrial Revolution, which intensified class division, the breaking of the American Revolution and/or the unprecedented Agricultural Revolution that involved the movement of people, decline of small communities, growth of cities and the beginnings of an integrated transportation system.<sup>7</sup> Issues that represented an important period in the history of England. Prince Regent himself was a staunch supporter of the Tory party, which mostly represented the interests of the merchant classes, official administrative groups and the country gentry<sup>8</sup> which is where the Austens belonged and whose initiatives they also supported.

It was an era that is mostly characteristic for its architecture, literature, fashion and culture, an era that was mostly seen as a period of achievements in culture and the emergence of the Romantic poets and their colourful language. A time of romance and elegance. And most of all an era that was so well portrayed by Jane Austen and her contemporaries in their evocative novels. The Prince Regent alone was a great patron of arts and literature and an open fan of Jane Austen’s novels whereby he bestowed her with the privilege to dedicate her next book to him, this being *Emma*. Honoured by such homage and at the same time aware of being unable to disobey, Jane accepted this privilege despite her dislike of him due to his

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<sup>5</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 67

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgian\\_era](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgian_era)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgian\\_era#Politics\\_and\\_social\\_revolt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgian_era#Politics_and_social_revolt)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Whig-Party-England>

extravagance and indulgence in spending on lavish parties, building projects and other excesses to the detriment of his subjects. Whilst Jane never got involved in the decadence of those times, his lavishness and ostentatiousness, nonetheless, contributed greatly to the flourishing of high society, leaving behind a tremendous legacy in the period of Regency as such as well as all the remarkable and ornate works of architecture of which emergence Jane was present and which we can nowadays admire and treasure.

Not only was it refined with regards to its cultural achievements but also shaped and altered the societal structure of Britain<sup>9</sup>. The Regency era, also known as the Age of Enlightenment, represented a time of immense social changes, advanced ideals, variety of movements and last but not least a period that undermined the authority of the monarchy and the Church, the Church that Jane Austen was so bound to. The Age of Enlightenment was the time when the patriarchal power was terminated but it was still seen as necessary for children to obey their parents, which brings us back to the issue of parents' rights for the forcing of their children into suitable marriage in order to secure the family status. Nevertheless, there was a clear understanding of one's rights and growing respect for an individual and what interested Jane most with regards to her society were the morals and behaviours of those that were relevant at that particular time and evident shifts in social classes where we can see gentry families fading and the 'new money' rising. All the glamour also came with its dark side, especially with regards to the lower classes and less affluent areas. All in all, Regency Britain was then undergoing a turbulent period filled with commotion and unrest.

### **1.2.2. Timeline of Major Events and their Influence on Jane Austen's World and Writing**

Today it is hard to believe that just one person and/or one nation might undergo so much in a relatively short era with a span of just a little over 40 years, but times were indeed tumultuous then. The same year Jane was born also represents the commencement of the great American War of Independence, the result of growing political differences between the two countries whilst being under one and the very same rule of George III. Despite the distance enhanced by the vast stretch of the ocean, the tumult soon moved to Europe and the Anglo-French War broke out only two years later, entered into only one year by the Spanish and the next year by the Dutch.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regency\\_era#Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regency_era#Society)

And whilst Jane never really uses the theme of war as the main theme, she does raise our awareness to it many times and not only with the constant presence of militia. ‘She was always very careful not to meddle with matters which she did not thoroughly understand. She never touched politics, law, or medicine, [...] But with ships and sailors she felt herself at home...’<sup>10</sup> With three of her brothers in the army and/or navy, she clearly had some knowledge of the war, which was even more intensified with the revolts that resulted in 1789 in the French Revolution, just across the Channel. This situation had no doubt brought distress to Austen’s family after the husband of Jane’s cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, was guillotined, despite George Austen’s previous disapproval of Eliza marrying a French officer for the French were England’s enemy in the American Revolutionary War. Inspired by liberal ideas, the revolution overthrew the monarchy and constituted a republic and had thus represented even more fear to Britain, especially the British aristocrats and those closely involved. The then ambassador to France, John Frederick Sackville, reported that the King in France was considered ‘*a very limited monarch, and the nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of the nation.*’<sup>11</sup> So, it does not come as a surprise that as soon as Louis XVI was executed in 1793, Britain’s fear increased and led to yet another conflict with France, making England a place of paranoia. With Napoleon coming to power, Britain constantly feared invasion, however displaying her naval powers when defeating Napoleon in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar and ten years later, in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo. With Jane’s brothers in the army and especially in the navy, we can find a very clear and accurate picture of naval life in her novels.

With this being just a very brief outline of major events in Jane’s lifetime, we can, however, more vividly perceive her life and the life she creates through her characters. With only a slight indication to the above, it was, most of all the portrayal of social life based on the then conventions that filled the pages of Jane Austen’s novels, which is not surprising for the Age of Enlightenment was undergoing significant changes in society.

Significant to the then society was also the Formation of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade from 1787 and the abolishment of the slave trade in Britain ten years later, in 1807. This, however, only implied to Britain and not the colonies. The issue of slavery may not be immediately obvious in her work, yet we do feel the tension this issue brings upon society, especially in her *Mansfield Park*, where the title itself can also be

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<sup>10</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p.18

<sup>11</sup> Alger, John Goldworth. "[Englishmen in the French Revolution](#)". Retrieved 14 July 2018– via Wikisource

attributed to this particular topic, for the estate/park was supported by yet another estate/plantation in Antigua. Whilst living a sheltered life in Britain and not directly profiting from slavery, there were several connections via her family and her father becoming a trustee of an Antigua plantation that made Jane well aware of the slavery situation in the West Indies and its significance for the merchants and the navy but what her own views on the topic were can only be speculated upon. Nevertheless, as her family was considered a family of intellectuals, they were considered not to support slavery and based on her reflexions in her writing, we can only assume as much.

In the dialogue between Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* she clearly interprets her view on the subject with? silence resulting in the conversation:

“Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?”

“I Did – and was in hopes the question would be followed by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence!”<sup>12</sup>

Whereas it seems, quite rightly, that it was an era filled with military conflicts and turbulent disturbances, there were events that may, to some, seem positive for the world’s further development, this, in particular, being the First Industrial Revolution. An event that represented a turning point to many, if not all, aspects of everyday life changing one’s standard of living considerably, from many technological innovations that strongly influenced the textile industry, iron production, transportation, agriculture and others to major economic as well as social changes, resulting, amongst others, in the Luddite protests of 1818 for the fear of labourers’ ‘livelihood and the skills they had spent years acquiring’<sup>13</sup> that would go to waste if replaced by machinery and/or in the emergence of the middle class to which Jane Austen belonged. She was born and raised during this process and whilst she did not live long enough to see its full transition, she did experience fragments of it, mostly in the area of transportation and agriculture and most of all in the new prejudices and social problems raised by the new class and implied on those in her novels.

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Mansfield Park*, BSA, 1996, p. 453

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-Luddites/>

### 1.3. Works

#### 1.3.1. Influences and Literary Context

The English novel was born in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century but it was not until the rise of the middle class and the upper class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that literature flourished, for it was the middle class that produced this literary genre and the upper class, including the newly rich, that were able to afford to invest in books, which have become not only more affordable due to cheaper printing technologies but also more available due to the rise of circulating libraries. The rise in literacy naturally played an important role in the growing popularity of the novel, especially amongst the female population, but was not yet respected by the intellectual who continued finding high-degree content in poetry, history and drama.

Jane Austen, however, defends the genre of the novel, which she herself produced, claiming: ‘Our Family are great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so’<sup>14</sup>, and on defence of the novel she tends to mock the aforementioned high-brow genres.

However, despite her mockery, she finds great inspiration in the very literary forms she ridicules, in particular in works by William Shakespeare, from whom she masters her work with dialogue and whom she refers to in *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* and also in plays by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Henry Fielding whereby we must note that plays in general represented an important part of households’ entertainment, especially that of Jane Austen’s who greatly participated and eventually took to the writing of the plays herself. Another important figure who greatly influenced her work was Dr. Samuel Johnson. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel contained realistic characters leading real lives, they tended to teach one a moral lesson, prompting not on reason but one’s behaviour and emotional responses, hence classified as sentimental novels. Jane Austen did not share these sentimental views though and that is the reason why Samuel Johnson’s model of a reasonable character inspired her so. One of her favourite novels from her childhood was *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* by Samuel Richardson, which led her to the imitation of his epistolary style as well as the style he called ‘writing to the moment’, in which she excelled. Contrary to Richardson, Jane presents her heroines in everyday situations and does not succumb to extreme scenarios. Still, the mockery remains and is, after all, what makes her work so entertaining. And we cannot, of course, forget the influence of John Milton and Laurence Sterne as well as the poet William Cowper of whom she was a great fan, his poetry being mentioned in *Persuasion* and *Sense and*

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<sup>14</sup> Letter to Cassandra, 18 December 1798

*Sensibility*. ‘Her reading was very extensive in history and belles lettres; and her memory extremely tenacious. Her favourite moral writers were Johnson in prose, and Cowper in verse.’<sup>15</sup>

It would be, however wrong to only mention male authors as Jane’s major inspiration for this period also saw a significant rise in the number of women writers. Many of them were naturally more popular than Jane herself, mostly for she wrote anonymously, but unlike her were open to slander, disrespect and tainted reputation as it was found unladylike to seek fame and a profitable career. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of novels with female audiences naturally also grew in popularity of women writers whom Jane was determined to join. The main ones to be mentioned are Frances Burney, whose novels of *Cecilia*, *Camilla* and *Evelina* most probably gave Jane Austen the idea for the title of one of her most popular novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary Wollstonecraft, who fought for women’s rights and just like Jane later claimed women to be rational beings, Ann Radcliffe, who made the genre of Gothic novel acceptable and whilst Jane refused to be associated with this genre and used it as yet another issue for mockery, she found inspiration there and implied it in *Northanger Abbey*, and the last but not least Maria Edgeworth, whose main influence on Austen referred to the issue of education.

As for her own work, her own reading experience and the emergence of constant changes practically in all aspects of human life provided Jane Austen with an abundance of issues to contemplate upon. Based on her personal experience, from which we learn of the historical consequences of the time, we mostly learn of the social reality within Jane’s own time and class, these mostly including the gentry where her family belonged and the professional and upper classes that have some sort of influence over her own class. She describes society as it is. Sir Walter Scott himself wrote in his diary that ‘That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with’<sup>16</sup>. He believes that her works ‘proclaim a knowledge of the human heart, with the power and resolution to bring that knowledge to the service of honour and virtue.’<sup>17</sup> That her work ‘belongs to a class of fiction which has arisen almost in our own times, and which draws the characters and incidents introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life ...’<sup>18</sup> With her wit, humour and biting irony accompanied by the

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<sup>15</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, Biographical Notice of the Author by Henry Austen, p. 141

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.janeausten.co.uk/sir-walter-scott-author-critic/>

<sup>17</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Jane Austen’s Casebook*, Emma, p. 44

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number13/sabor.htm>

necessity of realism, one can see her work as romantic comedies. The critic John Bayley believes that ‘the well-spring of her wit and irony is her won attitude that comedy is the saving grace of life’.<sup>19</sup> Despite the tumultuous period Jane lived through and which had shaped history, Jane avoided direct reference to historical or political issues of the day and instead of dwelling on the then popular and by most presented topic of preaching morals and/or adventurous, Gothic and fantasy romances, she mostly refers to social issues relevant to those days, these mostly being a women’s dependence on marriage and the pursuit of a suitable husband in order to secure social standing and economic security and the everyday issues such as parents’ behaviour to their children and vice versa, getting on with neighbours, fitting in within a particular society, discrimination between classes, the pleasures and dangers of falling in love and the ‘discrimination’ of women for she was well aware of the limited opportunities women had in the 18th and 19th century, even those amongst the gentry and upper middle classes. Her novels are full of dialogue and intriguing conversations, many of which have been engraved in her fan’s minds as quotes for life.

### **1.3.2. Austen’s Early Work**

Jane Austen’s upbringing was only one step to her love of books for her father alone was a devoted reader and whenever he had the opportunity or could afford it, or not as was the case, he purchased a book for his private library, which allowed Jane to guide her own reading and become educated and cultured throughout her early years. Necessary to say, it was not only her father’s devotion to reading and education per se but also her mother’s learning and refinement and her own attempt for poetry and later on her own brothers’ involvement in literary produce, whereby her eldest brother James published *The Loiterer Magazine* and her favourite brother Henry contributed to it.

Nevertheless, it was Jane who became THE writer of the family and had done so as early as at the age of around eleven, when she first started producing short pieces of fiction, which were meant as a gift to the family members and were often read aloud to them in the evenings and/or for the purpose of family entertainment. Staging plays in Jane Austen’s home played an important part of the family’s entertainment and whilst James Austen was the first one to contribute to them by writing their prologues and epilogues, Jane soon joined in as an

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<sup>19</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Austen#cite\\_ref-Bayley26ff\\_165-0](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Austen#cite_ref-Bayley26ff_165-0)

active participant and at the age of 12 produced her very first dramatic work, which resulted in three short plays.

‘Whatever she produced was a genuine home-made article.’<sup>20</sup>

The work she produced between the ages 11 and 18 is now known as *Juvenilia*, which comprises three notebooks given to her by her father, which she further divided into three volumes: Volume the First (eg. *Jack and Alice*, *Henry and Elisa*, *The Beautiful Cassandra*), Volume the Second (eg. *Love and Friendship* and *The History of England*) and Volume the Third (*Catherine and Eveline*) and where George Austen gave the notable and rightful inscription: ‘*Effusions of Fancy by a Very Young Lady Consisting of Tales in a Style Entirely New*’. And how right he was.

Followed by the short epistolary novel *Lady Susan*, which already demonstrates the importance of marriage, appearance and grace, Jane already brings in literature different from everything else bestowing literature with a breath of fresh air. Literature that is engaging, delightful and witty whilst still passing on the moral issues that was so noteworthy at Jane Austen’s times.

### 1.3.3. Austen’s Novels

‘Her power of inventing characters seems to have been intuitive, and almost unlimited. She drew from nature; but, whatever may have been surmised to the contrary, never from individuals. The style of her correspondence was in all respect the same as that of her novels. Everything came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen. It is not too much to say that she never despatched a note or letter unworthy of publication.’<sup>21</sup>

Jane Austen was active throughout her writing life and her early attempts were soon followed by the first drafts for her novels as we now know them.

It is not entirely certain when Jane started working on her very first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, but it is believed that it was somewhere between 1785 and 1787 and it was first entitled *Elinore and Marianne* and had the form of an epistolary novel. However, it was not published until 1811 under the pseudonym of ‘A Lady’ and Jane herself paid for the novel to be published, even paying the publisher a commission on sales.

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<sup>20</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 90

<sup>21</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, Biographical Notice of the Author by Henry Austen, p. 150

Her second published novel and nowadays most probably the utmost popular of them all, *Pride and Prejudice*, was published only two years later, in 1813 but was, however, commenced in 1796 under the title *First Impressions*. Unlike her previous novel, this was the first time she tried to produce a real manuscript for a publisher and as the novel sold out quickly, the second edition came out a year later.

The third, though less popular, novel is *Mansfield Park*, which was published in 1814 and portrayed Jane as a more mature author in comparison with her previous work.

In only a little over a year, she published yet another novel, *Emma*, which clearly shows how active Jane was when it came to her writing. It was also the first novel she published through John Murray and the last novel she herself saw published.

The remaining two novels were published posthumously, these being *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, both of which were prepared for publication by her brother Henry. *Northanger Abbey* was originally written as *Susan* and thus bears resemblance to Jane's juvenilia work for 'there is very little trace of personal allusion in the book, although it is written more in the style of family entertainment than any of the others.'<sup>22</sup> As for *Persuasion*, it was originally entitled by Henry as *The Elliots* and it is still uncertain as to how the title of *Persuasion* came about. However, it shows the one and very particular example of Jane's admiration of the navy and most of all the evidence of a shifting class, the result of the social world changing around her.

The only period Jane's writing activity slowed down was when living in Bath. Whether it was due to her resistance to moving there or her enjoying an intense social life owed to the characteristics of the city of Bath, we can only speculate. Nevertheless, luckily for us who admire and appreciate Jane Austen's work, there were two unfinished novels left after she died, whereby the first of them, *The Watsons*, commenced in Bath. The other novel was originally called *The Brothers* and can be now enjoyed under the title *Sanditon*.

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<sup>22</sup> Tomalin, Claire. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Vintage, 1997

## 2. Morals and Behaviour within the Matter of Social Classes and Conventions

### 2.1. Features of Regency Society

Society of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century was notably hierarchical and class-conscious with classes descending from the Royal family through nobility, the gentry, the clergy to the working class, which clearly indicates enormous contrast between the upper and lower classes and can be seen in more detail in this chart:

Map of English Society in 1814 (From Patrick Colquhoun's <i>A Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire</i> , 1814)		
Class	Heads of Families	Total Family Members
HIGHEST ORDERS: royal family, lords spiritual and temporal, great officers of state, peers above the degree of a baronet	576	2,380
SECOND CLASS: baronets, knights, country gentlemen, others with large incomes	46,861	234,305
THIRD CLASS: clergy, doctors, merchants and manufacturers on a large scale, bankers	61,000	112,200
FOURTH CLASS: lesser clergy, doctors, lawyers, teachers, ship owners, merchants and manufacturers of the second class, shopkeepers, artists, builders, mechanics, persons of moderate income	233,650	1,168,250
FIFTH CLASS: lesser freeholders, shopkeepers, innkeepers, publicans, persons in miscellaneous occupations	564,799	2,798,475
SIXTH CLASS: working mechanics, artists, craftsmen, agricultural laborers	2,126,095	8,792,800
SEVENTH CLASS: paupers, vagrants, gypsies, idle persons supported by criminal activity	3,371,281	16,165,803
ARMY AND NAVY: officers, including half pay noncommissioned officers, soldiers, seamen, marines, pensioners	10,500	69,000
	120,000	862,000

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And whilst Jane Austen's family belongs amongst the middle class, which would be referred to as 'the third class' in the chart above, it is the particular society she mostly refers to in her novels. When it comes to one's behaviour, we are provided by the comparison between the upper class (ie. Lady Catherine de Bourgh), the middle class (Bennet's family, Dashwood's family), and the lower class (being the servants and those less affluent, gamblers and thieves). Whilst the contrast between the individual classes was significant enough, one can also see the dark side of the times amongst the wealthy society. Even though development was showing tremendous progress, what we might see as a more preferable and prosperous condition also corresponded with what was available at the time and the portrayal of the times we nowadays have does not show the real picture at all. Whilst the wealthy had

<sup>23</sup> <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2008/01/20/social-classes-in-england-1814/>

the privilege to enjoy all sorts of social events, from family readings and theatrical performances through dinner parties to dances and elegant balls, even they had to fight the absence of basic comfort and humanly conditions. As soap was a luxury, regardless of class, the washing of clothing and personal hygiene was very irregular and would appear shocking to us. Let alone the fact that this resulted in people developing an unpleasant odour, whereby Jane alone admits in one of her letters to Cassandra that the hot weather they were having ‘keeps one in a continual state of inelegance’.<sup>24</sup> Yet more shocking or even appalling would be the issue of the way people relieved themselves, and when we think of the grandiose balls and assemblies we are presented with in Jane Austen’s novels, we hardly think of ceramic chamberpots (also known as piss pots’) that would be hidden behind some sort of screening panels or curtains.

What greatly differentiated the individual classes was the state of education they were entitled to whereby the upper classes naturally received the best education possible, with the level reducing with the class and a significant difference naturally referred to the education of male and female. Whilst men were entitled to a full education depending on their rank and status, in the case of the female population, academic subjects were adjusted to what was believed to be good enough for their needs. The privileged upper class of nobility was mostly educated at home by a governess whilst the middle class, also referred to as Commoners, who included Baronets, Knights and Landed Gentry where Jane Austen’s family belonged, had the opportunity to be educated at boarding schools, which we see, for instance in *Emma* in the form of Mrs Goddard’s boarding school. Nevertheless, even the landed gentry divided further to the minor and higher and could thus differ in the extent of education provided. The subjects believed suitable for a young girl included sewing, drawing, dancing and music (which also included playing a musical instrument, mostly the harp or pianoforte) and from academic subjects arithmetic, which was considered important in order to run a household, history, which was, just like the basics of geography, to provide the girls with topics for conversation, French, which was considered the language of nobility and was thus important to all better off societies, and last but not least writing, which did not only include penmanship and orthography but most of all the art of letter writing for women were considered natural when it came to keeping up correspondence that played a particularly important role in Jane’s life and novels. Whatever the extent of education, it was important in order to find a profession if the girl was not to find a suitable match. So, whilst some were

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<sup>24</sup> Lord Barburne, *Letters of Jane Austen*, 18 September 1796, p. 147

not destined to become a wife, they aimed for the position of a schoolmistress or a governess, which was considered a lonely and slave like occupation. Jane alone was ‘well educated, though not highly accomplished’, however, ‘she certainly enjoyed that important element of mental training, associating at home with persons of cultivated intellect’.<sup>25</sup>

### **2.1.1. Landed Gentry, Wealth and Inheritance**

Belonging to the lower classes did not give one much privilege but might provide one with more natural freedom. The higher the rank the more conventions there were to adhere to, the more moral principles to observe.

Jane Austen’s family belonged with the Landed Gentry, a class of Commoners/Nobility, a class Jane wrote about in her novels, whether it was the lower or higher gentry. In order to be a part of the landed gentry, the family needed to own at least 300 acres of land, which would provide them with a considerable income, have a career that would provide the family with relevant living standards, a good family name to be accepted within society and naturally correct behaviour for the higher the class the more scrutinised it was. That meant that no matter what the family fortune, if you met the above, the social class remained unchanged. You did not need to be a member of the peerage. We can see this difference, for instance, with the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*, who came virtually with no fortune and Emma, whose family was well off.

Members of the Landed Gentry were called Sir/Lady, Mister/Mrs. or Gentlemen, which was specifically granted to those with an affluent business, Navy and Army officers and Clergymen, which brings us back to Jane’s family and her father’s status for he alone was considered a gentlemen. And a ‘rector who chanced to be a gentleman and a scholar found himself superior to his chief parishioners in information and manners and became a sort of centre of refinement and politeness.’<sup>26</sup> Generally, gentlemen made their riches via their estates, whose size dictated the wealth of the family. The estates were passed down to sons whereby the eldest was entrusted with managing the estate and farm operations and supervising their tenants. Whilst the eldest sons tended to bear the entire burden of running the family’s assets, it sometimes took many years for them to do so and meanwhile left them leading a lazy life. The younger sons, though, were expected to find themselves a career that would be respectable

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<sup>25</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 39

<sup>26</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 15

for their social status, this mostly being a lawyer, joining the army/navy or entering the church for the Church of England, which was a very powerful establishment in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes, however, even the eldest sons pursued these careers, as we can, for instance, recall in *Sense and Sensibility* and Edward Ferrars' decision to become a clergyman.

As for Jane's family themselves, only two of her brothers did not fit this scenario for George suffered from epilepsy and most probably also deafness and did not live with the family and her brother Edward was adopted when a child by their father's wealthy cousin, Thomas Knight, whose estates he eventually inherited. Henry, Francis and Charles, however, all joined the army/navy and James entered the church and became a rector of *Stevenson* after their father decided to retire to Bath. When in service, however, George Austen belonged amongst that clergy of intellect and moderate wealth, his income, like most of the clergy of the Church of England, mainly coming from glebe (an area of land within a parish which had been donated to the church by its parishioners in order to support the parish priest) and tithe (a tenth of the annual gross product of all cultivated land in the parish paid as a contribution to a religious organisation, hence the priest of the parish).

Nevertheless, not everyone termed a gentleman was a member of the Landed Gentry but could also be distinguished by his personal qualities. And the same applied to women as if they didn't have the luxury of having the right name and title, they did need to be accomplished enough to have a chance in the competitive marriage market and thus make the right wife the husband could introduce to the neighbouring gentry without any embarrassment. And clergymen, like Jane's father, were only one example of Landed Gentry who were eager to find such wives. Moreover, a clergyman's wife was even further expected to bear the aforementioned qualities and accomplishments in order to provide her husband with an enjoyable and cultivated companionship when becoming lonely and isolated in their parish. To please their husbands and to be able to take part in intellectual conversation was only one part of their responsibilities for they were also expected to take charge of entertaining their guests and organising all sorts of parties that happened to take place in their own abodes and last but not least to run them as economically as possible, whereupon Lady Catherine de Bourgh advises Mr Collins to 'choose a gentlewoman, for my sake and for your own; let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a long way...'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p 228

### 2.1.2. Social Events

Not everyone was, however, born on the proverbial bed of roses and the Regency period in particular represented a significant example of social class hierarchy and its importance. However, not even the richest lives' paths were spared from thorns. Virtually everything depended on what position one held within the British Empire and this placed further obligations on each and every member of the then society.

When reading Jane Austen's books or watching films based on her stories, not many of us can even imagine the background of the Regency society and what the less fortunate classes had to undergo in order to survive. They were certainly deprived of the pleasures of leisure we read about for this was only available to those who could afford it and even then this depended on the position they held within the middle class, let alone the upper class.

Being part of the Landed Gentry and/or accepted within the society of the either higher or minor nobility entails not only men to be cultured and educated and for ladies to be accomplished but also to participate in a number of social events held both publicly and in private residences. These included family and friends' gatherings for a game of cards, reading, putting on a play or just making conversation, dinner parties, and dances and balls with the latter calling for the abidance of very specific manners and ethics.

With regards to the role of a gentlemen's wife, planning a dinner party was a task to behold for it was more than just about food and entertainment activities. The dinner per se needed to include at least three courses, usually soup, the main course and a dessert. The entertainment could either be in a game of cards (popular at that time was Quadrille, Piquet, Loo, etc.), a theatrical performance, reading, playing the pianoforte or holding an impromptu dance which occurred simultaneously during the evening. However, organising a dinner party also included a number of smaller details we nowadays don't even consider, such as the people that need to be invited in order not to offend anyone or the seating order for dinner.

When it came to dances and balls, it was an entirely different matter. Those were held either at private residences or in assembly rooms and represented the best place for people to meet and find their partners. 'There is no doubt that Jane herself enjoyed dancing, for she attributes this taste to her favourite heroines; in most of her works, a ball or a private dance is mentioned, and made of importance.'<sup>28</sup> Dancing as such was considered an essential part of middle and upper class' education and also offered couples a chance for private conversation.

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<sup>28</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p 32

Jane herself claims that ‘every savage can dance’<sup>29</sup> and that whilst dancing ‘One must speak a little...It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together, and yet for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.’<sup>30</sup>

## **2.2. How to Behave in Regency Society**

No matter the title, every person of the Regency period was, however, to know his/her place and to act accordingly to their social status. Whilst initially based on Renaissance Italy and 17<sup>th</sup> century France, manners in Regency England were, however, shaped to a particular style to suit the period and place. Social classes were well distinguishable then and were portrayed in many ways, from personal behaviour including one’s turn of phrase, education and posture to the way people dressed for particular events as well as everyday life to seating arrangements at dinner tables, entering rooms, meeting new people and addressing one another.

With regards to some of the aforementioned instances that required particular codes and ethics, it did not matter whether one was a man or woman for they applied to all, regardless. And no matter which class one came from, they all had just the same ambitions in improving their status, both for their own benefit as well as for building the grounds for the future generation of their family. Members of the working class hoped for a better apprenticeship, going to local schools and then acquiring a better position in life. Anyone of a higher status, from the middle class upwards, would seek university education for a gentleman with a degree was considered to have a better position in society than someone of the same standing yet with no university degree. Some would find their way into the higher society via the military, politics or otherwise serving the King. Nevertheless, needless of rank, it was in everyone’s interest to marry within their social status or to aim higher.

Nonetheless, the sun did not always shine bright for everyone and whilst most tried to climb the social ladder and secure their position and thus a more comfortable life, there were many whose lives took an entirely contrary turn and whilst once living in leisure, they suddenly found themselves a step or lower or even in poverty, this either being due to finding themselves

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 189

<sup>30</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 221

in serious financial difficulties through unfortunate investments or even by joining in wedlock with an impoverished nobleman.

Whilst Jane Austen came from the middle class, those from her acquaintance as well as her characters were the very persons to seek a better station in life through marriage. And it is the higher society that needed to adhere to more of the ethics and morals than others. Jane knew it well and she mocked it just as well but if one, here included, did not abide by the rules given and expected, one did not fit within the society desired for one's behaviour was only one although an important trait that one needed to abide by in order to belong.

Today, we wouldn't give much thought to seating arrangements at a family dinner table but those were indeed of quite an importance in Jane Austen's days. The master and mistress of the house sat at either end of the table, with the eldest or superior being seated next to them. Superiority came in different phases, one of which also being based on one's marital status whereby those married took precedence over single ladies, regardless of their age. Everyone was aware of their social status and did not need to be reminded of their position by either the master or mistress and simply followed the rules. This is very well portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Lydia returns home as a married woman. Prior to that, Jane and Elizabeth always sat to the side of their father, at one end of the table. When the new circumstances occur, Lydia takes up this position, saying to Jane: 'Ah, Jane I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman.'<sup>31</sup>

When it came to the entering of a room, the first criteria referred to one's social rank with the aristocracy being the first to enter, followed by the Landed Gentry and their families whose order of entry was based on their ages and once again on their marital status, whereby married ladies took priority.

If one was fortunate enough to belong to a higher rank, their priorities went much further whatever the situation. Once all seated or present at a dance, those of a higher rank were free to address anyone they pleased but those of a lower rank needed to wait to be introduced by a mutual friend or the host and even then to acknowledge their acquaintance with a wave or a nod instead of entering into conversation themselves. That precedence also appertained to the nobility.

When it came to addressing one another, that was yet another issue with very specific guidelines, which applied to all, unmindful of the class. First names were only used to address the family and close friends, but the higher class also had permission to use first names when

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<sup>31</sup> <sup>31</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 324

addressing friends of a lower rank. Inside a family, the mother would be called Mrs. + family name, the eldest daughter was referred to as Miss + family name whilst her young sisters would be addressed as Miss + first name. For instance, Mrs. Dashwood, Miss Dashwood (=Elinor), Miss Marianne, Miss Margaret (Sense and Sensibility). The same applied to the sons, where the eldest would be referred to as Mr. Ferrars (Edward) and the younger as Mr. Robert Ferrars. When addressing someone of a higher rank outside the family, one needed to adhere to the right title of the person addressed in order not to offend anyone or violate morals. Moreover, approaching someone of a higher class without due introduction was unheard of and that is why we evidence such scorn from the members of assembly in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr Collins dares to address Mr Darcy.

Whilst it might be hard to believe, even a simple activity such as dancing would be conditioned to fit in within the then conventions. Even though dancing provided young people with an opportunity to mingle and enter into private conversations, the man couldn't ask the lady to dance with him more than twice and could only do so if properly introduced beforehand by a mutual acquaintance or the host of the assembly. Nevertheless, whilst each dance would take about half an hour, it would consist of five to eight couples, which would trim the couples' conversation to the minimum. The ball always commenced with a minuet, which was 'expressive of grace and dignity, rather than of merriment. It abounded in formal bows and courtesies, with measured paces... It was executed by one lady and gentleman, amidst the admiration, or the criticism, of surrounding spectators.'<sup>32</sup> This only proves that there were no 'facilities for flirtation, or interesting intercourse'<sup>33</sup> and the same applied to the merrier dances that became popular towards the end of the century.

The way one behaved in Regency society, however, also depended on gender and whilst some only applied to men, women were supposed to accept their approach regardless.

### **2.2.1. Manners for Men**

Young boys of the Regency era were taught how to be gentlemen from a very early age and whilst the grounds for one's manners and behaviour came from family and school, there were also several courtesy books available, though they often contradicted each other. All in all, they all were to achieve men to be well-spoken and free of rude and vulgar remarks,

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<sup>32</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 33

<sup>33</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 33-34

educated in order to be able to converse and give opinion on all subjects that emerged, to portray elegant appearance and posture, as well as to be able to dance and entertain a lady and last but not least to be polite, good-humoured and amiable. Regardless of his own feelings and opinions, he was always to act correctly and to be gracious to the poor.

A man was always to be careful and correct when addressing a woman, this applying to all, the way he looked at her, spoke to her or what gestures he might have made. However, the way a gentleman behaved when walking alone did not only refer to his approach to the female population but to all for even such a simple instance as walking along the street involved some kind of etiquette. He was, for instance to give the upper side of the pavement, that is the one nearer the line of buildings, to a woman as well as a man who would be disadvantaged by the burden of a heavy load or that of a clerical profession or an elderly person. He was, moreover, to stay away from any crowds and instead of pushing his way forward, he would be rather considered to wait aside until his path was clear to take. When out walking, a gentleman was also considered to offer an umbrella to any woman without in the case of a downpour and to do so in such a way that she was covered properly to his own detriment and to either accompany her all the way to her abode or to offer to leave the umbrella with her.

When meeting people in public, a gentleman was required to bow and raise his hat to every lady in the street and not to enter into conversation unless he was ascertained that such was approved by the lady. The same applied when encountering another gentleman for it was not recommended to shake hands in public.

The one time a gentleman was, however, to offer his hand to a lady was when assisting her to or from a carriage, which was considered a matter of course. If he was to travel with the lady, he was required to disembark from the carriage first in order to be able to offer his assistance to the lady. At all times he was to be careful so as not to step upon her dress. If occupying the carriage first, a gentleman was then required to leave the best seat inside the carriage to the lady and take another vacant seat.

As for the so ever popular dinner parties and dances the middle and higher classes held, a gentleman was always to dress formally in a white shirt and waistcoat. He would then be considered to ask a lady to dance upon a proper previous introduction and only dance with her one or two dances unless there was an agreed engagement between the two.

Jane Austen's heroes offer a wide range of gentlemen, from villains and rogues (Wickham, John Willoughby), through sarcastic and witty characters (Mr. Bennet, Sir John Middleton) to the wealthy landowners portraying either their haughtiness and arrogance (Fitzwilliam Darcy, Robert Ferrars) or perfect traits that an English gentleman is to possess

(George Knightly, Colonel Brandon). The range of social status is also broad, introducing a farmer (Robert Martin), a poor clergyman (Dr. Grant), a naval officer (Captain Frederic Wentworth), a wealthy landowner (Charles Bingley) and of a higher position (Lady Catherine de Bourgh).

### **2.2.2. Manners for Women**

When it came to women, however, they were expected to be meek and obedient to their father and husband and to take care of their appearance. Just like men, there was a number of conduct manuals that would advise them as to how to meet these expectations regarding their obedience and would, moreover, teach them to hide any learning they might have for education was not to be valued over beauty in women.

Manners for women represented a particular topic for Jane's mockery and that is why we often see her heroines to be in breach of convention. Whilst the norm calls for humbleness, Jane's characters are often forthright and outspoken, often in charge of their life and/or family household, which nevertheless, makes them unique in allowing us to forgive their flaws.

Whilst the difference between male and female was grand in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were also obliged to follow a number of rules and norms, most probably even more so than men, for they were believed of lower status within society. Like men, women from the middle and higher classes were provided with education but this was adjusted to what was required from them. They were not to pursue careers and whilst there were expected to be accomplished, this meant to possess particular skills and knowledge in order to be of good marriage material. The matter of accomplishment was subjective though, for different people were of different opinion when it came to this issue. Regardless, the individual views on women's accomplishments, they were required to be able to run a household, provide suitable companionship to their husbands and represent a respectable hostess to their friends and neighbouring gentry.

Most important with regards to a woman's social status was also her marital status for a married woman had more privileges than a single one, let alone a spinster. Marrying well was the number one issue for all women from all classes and their accomplishments, behaviour and adherence to the then conventions allowed them to pursue the correct match in a man whose status, moreover, determined their own place in society. If, however, a woman could not find a man to take her and chose or was forced to become a spinster, she would become a burden to her family or would need to seek the career of a governess, which was not the most desirable

option for a young woman. Whilst Jane and her siblings did not grow up with governesses, this topic appears in all her novels, for instance in the personage of Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, of whom Jane says that ‘With the fortitude of a devoted novitiate, she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace, and hope, to penance and mortification forever’<sup>34</sup> and/or in *Pride and Prejudice* where Benet’s sisters enjoy the same freedom from governesses as Jane herself and which is shocking and frowned upon by Lady Catherine de Bourgh for whose society growing up without a governess would be unheard of and upon which she contemplates: ‘Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! — I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education.’<sup>35</sup>

No matter what path a woman chose to follow, she would always be required to take care of herself from the point of view of clothing as well as her hairstyle. Whilst Jane alone was not believed to care about her appearance all that much, even she would be obliged to abide by certain conventions in order to be considered well dressed and decked out. When it came to female attire, it was not only about the overall appearance but about every single detail, from undergarments, through everyday dresses, evening dresses to outwear and hairstyle. Looking only tidy, as Jane once referred herself to in one of her letters to Cassandra just was not enough. As for public manners that applied to men, women were privileged to be the gentler figures who were to be respected, admired and regarded with honour but when acknowledged by a man in public, a well-bred woman be required to respond to his salutations. And whilst a man should not ask a woman for a dance without a proper introduction beforehand, a well-respected woman would not accept such an invitation.

Jane was well aware of the conventions that were to be observed and the reasons for mocking them so was for she was also aware that society was far from flawless. Whilst her heroines broke these conventions, other characters pursued the morals and pinpoint the flaws presented. Her female characters include heroes who were given up for adoption to wealthier family members (Frank Churchill), spinsters (Miss Bates), governesses (Mrs Weston), wives of the clergy (Charlotte Lucas), heroines whose social status changed virtually overnight due to the laws of inheritance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and dropped them down the social ladder (the Dashwood women) and those from wealthy families (Caroline Bingley). Whilst male heroes came from more varied nooks of the then society and represented more varied roles, Jane’s

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels*, *Emma*, BSA, 1996, p. 661

<sup>35</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels*, *Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 255

heroines one and only purpose in life was to find security within society, either for themselves by marrying well or for their daughters by acting as matchmaker.

### **3. Principles of Marrying in Jane Austen's Time**

#### **3.1. Jane Austen's Own Love Life**

In the previous chapters we found that Regency society was bound by a number of conventions that needed to be abided by if one wanted to fit in a particular social class. And the principles of marrying in Jane Austen's times are no exception. Moreover, one's love life and its consequences represented a significant part for both men and women and the way one behaved when having strong affections towards the opposite sex were to be portrayed in an entirely different fashion that we might be used to today.

Even more surprising might be the fact that the author of charming romances filled with memorable and timeless relationships never married but the love encounters and adventures she presents to her readers give us plenty of evidence that she was well aware of what was going on in the hearts of young people and what obstacles did the then conventions represent with regards to expressing one's feelings and their courtship.

Jane alone first fell in love when she was 20 and it was the love of her life that made her show her the happiness two people can share in their infatuation. The man in question was none other than the legendary Tom Lefroy, a young law student whom she met during his stay at Jane's friend's house. She was literally captivated by him, being suddenly open to the issues of the world, open discussions of sexual acts and scandalous behaviour and others. The romance she shared with Tom made her behave recklessly as one might be entitled to when in love, though it did not, most probably, correspond with what convention required. Hence another reason for mocking them in her future writing, which was influenced by her love experience more than she would have had imagined. Her romance with Tom Lefroy didn't last long even though they both most probably shared the same feelings but their love was not meant to be as Tom was, as the eldest son of a large family, expected to support his family and marrying a poor clergyman's daughter was not what was expected of him. So, it happened that Tom eventually married a rich heiress and Jane never saw him again. The harsh reality of life naturally had a strong influence not only on her writing where we see the topic of unrequited love and/or undesired romantic encounters between people from different social backgrounds but also in her own life. Nevertheless, the proof of their mutual affection was evident to those

who knew them for Leigh wrote that despite the destiny that kept them apart he, in his old age, remembered her and spoke of her as of someone ‘to be much admired, and not easily forgotten...’<sup>36</sup>

It has been speculated that Jane might have experienced yet another romantic encounter, this time with a young clergyman whose name is believed to have been Samuel Blackall but he is believed to have died unexpectedly shortly after their encounter, which put the end to their short possible attachment.

Bereft of love, Jane eventually received a proposal for marriage when 27 and it was indeed an attractive offer for it came from the wealthy landowner Harris Bigg-Wither, the brother of her good friends. She even accepted his offer aware of the fact that this match would secure not only her future making her a wealthy wife but also the future of her sister Cassandra and her mother whom she would be able to support. As sad and befuddling as may be, Jane, nevertheless changed her mind overnight and took her acceptance back, a decision that wrote her future. Choosing the path of a spinster, however, allowed her to turn her affections towards writing and thus sharing her thoughts on love with us and moreover, introducing us to the love and marriage and morality of the Regency Era.

### **3.2. Love and Romance**

With the importance of securing the best possible match, love might seem to be on the side lines, but in fact, even marrying for love was encouraged. However, if one was fortunate enough to find love prior to securing marriage, he/she was not to disclose his/her feelings in public for a public disclosure of one’s passion was considered poor and unsatisfactory. Giving a man too much encouragement was seen unwise but how was the man to know that his attentions were to be welcomed if not prodded just a little. We can see this clearly in Jane’s characters whose disclosure of affection differs greatly, from Elizabeth Bennet, who believes that ‘any man is bound to realise when a woman is in love with him, however reticent she may be’ to Marianne Dashwood whose encouragement to Willoughby and her consequent display of sentiments go beyond the boundaries of emotion. Whilst displaying some emotions might be considered healthy, being too passionate might allow others to take advantage of the person

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<sup>36</sup> J.E.Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 48

and that is exactly where the etiquette came in useful, protecting such women from making fools of themselves in the eyes of the public.

### **3.2.1. Courtship/Proposals and Marriage**

The fact that Jane Austen herself decided to follow the path of a spinster and never to get married makes her romantic adventures between her characters even more intriguing. Why didn't she pursue the same status, which seemed that important in her times is a question we will never get answered and can only speculate upon but what we can answer is the importance of marriage and everything that led to it? What did one need to do to in order to find the right, eligible partner that would secure him/her a comfortable life within the right social class and what steps did one have to take in order to get as far as that?

We have already learnt that one's life in the Regency Era was very much bound by the then conventions and the issue of courtship and proposals was not any different. On the contrary, courting a lady was far from what we can only imagine today.

The first and foremost criteria for courting a lady was naturally her age for the men were not to address a lady if she hadn't yet come out into the society and thus was passed the age she could marry, which was 16 years of age. As for the men, the age of coming out was 21 and granted them freedom in making such decision as closing a marriage and other contracts. Very often the gentlemen happened to be of an even older age for they were also first entitled to build their career and establish their wealth and status in order to be able to support a family.

Meeting the right lady or gentleman was also extremely limited as the only opportunity they had was to either meet at dinner parties, dances and balls and or to be introduced through family and friends. Without such an introduction it was difficult for one to encounter someone, especially the one who would meet their family's expectations. Nevertheless, whilst this was a chance for one to meet someone, it did not give one much opportunity for private conversations for dances were limited to two and whilst they lasted some half hour each, the partners of the individual couples they consisted of would be constantly mobile and therefore wouldn't allow for decent conversation, as was described in more detail in the chapter Social Events, the description alone provided by her nephew J.E.Austen-Leigh. Besides dancing, a young lady would also need to be chaperoned at all times, which also restricted the couple becoming properly acquainted but if the lady wished to retain her good reputation, she herself would never place herself alone with a man, which thus made courting quite a public issue. Following a previous introduction, the man had the chance to pursue courting further by calling upon the

lady at her home and perhaps taking her for a stroll or a ride on horseback but all these instances would include a chaperone close-by.

The step from courtship to proposal was not necessarily that long and once the man was satisfied with the lady he had chosen and sure of her own affection towards himself, there was nothing to keep him from asking her to accept him. This was the one thing that was done in private, yet commonly at her family place, as we see, for instance, in *Sense and Sensibility* when Willoughby asks for a private consultation with Marianne. Even though his asking is disrupted by at that moment unexplained circumstances, there is a belief for the two to be engaged due to all the displays of affections presented to members of their society. Having been proposed to was also the one moment the lady had control over the situation for this was the moment she could actually refuse the gentleman. Whilst Jane herself was proposed to only once, she first did not take this privilege but did not, however hesitate to take another, and that is to pull out of the engagement shortly afterwards (the next morning in her case). It was the second and last possibility for a lady to have some sort of control over the whole proposal issue in which she could decide upon her future. Once the engagement was formed and formally announced, it was not common for this to be broken for it would represent considerable damage to one's reputation. Providing the young lady accepted the proposal, the young man would go to her father and ask his permission for his daughter's hand in marriage. In some circles the gentleman would even ask his own father for his consent and approval of the match and once all the permissions were given, the next step was to secure proprietary issues. Drawing up marriage articles (nowadays pre-nuptial agreements) would not only include the distribution of property and wealth on both sides but would also include the ways the man would provide for his wife and would further outline the wife's and children's destiny upon their husband's and father's death.

### **3.2.2. Wedding and Elopements**

The importance of marriage in the Regency era can be seen from a different number of points of view but as the Church of England retained its dominance after the evangelical movement inside and outside the Church, it also held considerable influence over the reason for marriage. The Book of Common Prayer from 1662 gives one a clear idea of what marriage should be like and the reasons for which matrimony was ordained.

However, no book, regardless, can dictate one's heart of its course and things did not always go as required and accessible by society, and if the couple did not have their parents' consent to marry, their only chance was to elope, mostly running off to Gretna Green, a place where one could even marry if below the age of 21. With the restrictions placed upon young couples by the conventions of the Regency era, Jane alone mentions this in *Love and Friendship* where Janetta and M'Kenzie leave for Gretna Green to be joined in marriage and so do Julia Bertram and Mr Yates in *Mansfield Park*. *Pride and Prejudice*, Gretna Green is the intended destination for Lydia and George Wickham and even though it does not come to that, it is revealed in Lydia's letter left for her friend:

"MY DEAR HARRIET,

"You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise tomorrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with whom, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send word to Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater, when i write to them and sign my name "Lydia Wickham." What a good joke it will be!"<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, this behaviour was considered scandalous and would not only ruin the couple's reputation but would also jeopardise the lady's siblings' chance to marry and condemn her family to gossip and being frowned upon.

If the couple, however, managed to get all the permissions they needed and all necessary settled, there was nothing to hold one back from proceeding with wedding arrangements. Whilst the gentleman would be entitled to prepare his home for his bride to be, the bride would go shopping for an entire wardrobe she would need as a wife and lady of the house. Strangely enough, the attire necessary for the mistress of a house was of much more importance than a wedding dress alone, which was, actually, to be quite simple and white – the white colour representing wealth. And if the bride to be did not have the means to acquire a new dress, she would opt for her best dress, which would most probably be coloured, which was considered more practical as these lasted longer and could thus be used for everyday use.

Probably the one and only control a woman would otherwise have over the planning of her wedding would be the publishing of the date, which could be anything but certain holy days. Regardless of the day, the marriage ceremony would take place in the morning and would

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 312

not surprisingly be a grand ceremony attended by a large flock of people. On the contrary, a wedding was an event for close family and friends, if at all. No special floral arrangements nor personal vows. It was a simple event followed by the entering of marriage lines that were to provide the bride with proof that the ceremony had actually taken place and thus made her a respectable woman. Followed by a wedding breakfast, the newly-weds would then leave for their honeymoon. Despite the lack of grandeur in the ceremony, the wedding would, however, be announced in newspapers for it seemed the most important part of it all.

#### **4. The Pursuit and Economics of Marriage**

##### **4.1. The Importance of Marriage**

The Church of England placed a significant importance on marriage and having been born into a clergyman's household naturally made Jane aware of the religious duty when it came to marriage. But faith and love, which one might consider the most important reasons for being joined in wedlock, were sadly not of prime importance. Whilst one reason for marriage was to make the woman a respectable lady, the most crucial reason was to secure her financial being and position within desired social circles.

This, however, did not only apply to women but it was women who did not tend to remain single and if they did, whether deliberately or not, their life required considerable changes whereas men had more freedom in life. Not only had they a chance to remain single, they were not even considered to make any significant changes to their lifestyle and leading a life as a bachelor was only a choice of one's status.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife,'<sup>38</sup> and when it came to wealth and property, there were indeed particular issues that did concern the male population with regards to the marriage market. One being the fact that if there was property within the family, the men were expected to marry in order to bear children, preferably a son and thus to protect the family assets. The other issue being the law of inheritance, which favoured the eldest son. This was positive with regards to keeping one's fortune within a family but, on the other hand, put more obligations on them with regards to the choice of their future wives and disadvantaged younger sons who were either forced to seek a respectable profession or an eligible wife. All in all, regardless of age superiority, it was always a son or a male relative to inherit assets, leaving women

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 179

dependable either on their close family/relatives or a suitable suitor. This shows that the eligibility of one or another went both ways but naturally put more demand on the female and this is where the pursuit of marriage begins.

That is also why in Jane Austen's novels, we mostly see fortune pursuit from a female point of view, and in her private correspondence with her niece, Jane herself claimed that 'Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony'.<sup>39</sup> Being a clergyman's daughter did not endow her with a sufficient dowry but the fact that her father was a well-educated man of Oxford and due to her mother's family connections, she could have expected a decent proposal and being aware of the importance of marriage and thus security makes it even more surprising for her to turn down the only proposal she had. But as a clergyman's daughter, marrying purely for economic reasons with no love and affection was not an institution she was willing to enter.

#### **4.2. Marriage and Money - Eligibility**

Regarding the importance of marriage described in the previous chapter, it is not at all surprising that mothers felt strongly about meddling in their daughters' romantic affairs. It was not unusual for upper classes to retain arranged marriages for it was the safest way as to how to secure material issues. Nevertheless, as times were changing and the Age of Enlightenment shows a different attitude to marriage, both men and women had, to some extent, liberty of choice of their future spouse, providing he/she was the right one, the eligible one.

And that is where mothers' matchmaking came in. Where we have previously mentioned women's obligations as wives and ladies of the household, marrying people off also belonged amongst one of their undertakings, giving them yet another duty within the family's framework. Finding an eligible partner for their daughter represented not only managerial skill but also social knowledge and maternal understanding and was considered a business the mother was obliged to attend to. The importance of matchmaking is beautifully portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs Bennet's endeavours to see all her five daughters married comfortably and out of the house.

'If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield,' said Mrs. Bennet to her husband, 'and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Letter to her niece Fanny, 13 March 1817

<sup>40</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 182

As was previously mentioned and is evident from many aforementioned instances, everyone in the Regency era was well aware of their social rank and thus try to marry within their social class. Marrying someone of inferior standing would be considered unfortunate and would bring down the whole family's status but this did not apply to gentlemen from upper classes, providing the lady in question was pretty and brought up as a gentlewoman. If there was no fortune on the woman's side, good manners and learning were seen as a good enough substitute to most upper-class families. So, when Mr Darcy builds up his courage to propose to Elizabeth in the most romantic words Jane Austen's readers treasure as their life quote: 'In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you,'<sup>41</sup> it is difficult yet necessary for us to see that it is not her social status yet her manners and character that he is willing to stand against his family's possible objections to this proposal.

## **5. Conclusion**

Whilst there were considerable differences amongst the individual classes and the conventions dictated particular life standards and manners, it was also a time of changes within families and in relationships, both amongst parents and members of society. The easing of certain rules and principles allowed both men and women to pursue their desires, whether it was in education, culture or love and where convention still dictated certain rights and privileges. Nevertheless, having tackled a number of subjects within the chapters which either illustrated the Regency or and the then conventions that had tremendous impact on the then society and people's attitude to many instances of life, I believe I have managed to convey the idea of the significance of social classes and to show the importance of marriage in Jane Austen's time and portrayed it on a number of examples from both Jane Austen's private background as well as that of her characters and thus to help everyone who is to become acquainted with this paper to see the reason behind her writings and understand more clearly not only her characters but also the society and times that formed the overall picture.

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<sup>41</sup> Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels, Pride and Prejudice*, BSA, 1996, p. 266

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