

Jane Austen, Social Engineer?



A sketch of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra (c.1810)

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It's hard to overstate Jane Austen's influence on the world. Austen scholars claim that only Shakespeare is more important in English literature, and they might be right. There were romance novelists before her, but nobody can dispute that Austen defines her genre as much as Tolkien defines his. And as romance novels outsell everything else, their queen is most certainly worth a look.

'Darling Jane' may be as popular as ever, but does she really deserve that moniker? Once you've read a few of Miles' papers, you'll notice that her Wikipedia page has its share of red flags, and that her books have questionable aspects, too, as I'll try to

show. Although I will set out to paint her as a villainess — a take you will be hard put to find anywhere in the copious and almost exclusively hagiographic Austen literature — please remember that this is only my interpretation and that it is also a possibility that the powers that be like her because she never questioned their dogmas and she merely reinforced the worldview that was imparted on her.

On to Wikipedia.

Compared to other authors of note, Jane Austen lived a remarkably dull life: no major travelling, no marriage, no children, no interesting friendships with people outside her own immediate family — all this is a mismatch for a person with such a lively, witty mind as hers. Or are we only given the dull bits, with the interesting parts left out? That's actually what we know for a fact when it comes to her correspondence: "During her lifetime, Austen may have written as many as 3,000 letters, but only 161 survived." That's just a little over 5%, the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. We're told her relatives censored her to such an extent because they thought her letters too caustic and gossipy. Could be. Or she communicated with editors who told her exactly what kind of propaganda she should write (merely one way of looking at this, proof is hard to come by, but it would fit what Miles has described in other cases); another reason might be that she corresponded with people she officially shouldn't have known.

In the same vein, we can speculate that her early death at age 41 was just her early retirement, and that the second part of her life is even more censored than her letters. However, we have to remember that medical care in 1817 was not the same as in 2017, which makes this idea significantly less plausible.

If you consider all of the above too flimsy, read the following:

For much of Jane's life, her father, George Austen (1731–1805), served as the rector of the Anglican parishes at Steventon and at nearby Deane.[16][e] He came from an old, respected, and wealthy family of wool merchants. Over the centuries as each generation of eldest sons received inheritances, their wealth was consolidated, and George's branch of the family fell into poverty. He and his two sisters were orphaned as children and had to be taken in by relatives. His sister Philadelphia went to India to find a husband and George entered St John's College, Oxford on a fellowship, where he most likely met Cassandra Leigh (1739–1827).[18] She came from the prominent Leigh family; her father was rector at All Souls College, Oxford, where she grew up among the gentry. Her eldest brother James inherited a fortune and large estate from his great-aunt Perrot, with the only condition that he change his name to Leigh-Perrot. [19]

There are so many red flags here that Miles might as well highlight the entire paragraph. We have the "old, respected [for what? by whom?], and wealthy family of wool merchants," the riches-to-rags story, orphans (straight out of Dickens!), Oxbridge connections, "the prominent Leigh family," "a fortune and large estate,"

and the Perrot name (think Ross Perot).

Genealogy is not my forte, but it doesn't have to be, since Wikipedia just gives the game away. Austen also had two men in her life, of her own generation, who reached such stellar highs in their careers that it makes you wonder what social circles this supposedly impoverished middle-class woman really moved in. Her brother, Sir Francis William Austen, not only lived to the very old age of 91, but also retired as **Admiral of the Fleet**, which is like the king of the Royal Navy. And Tom Lefroy, the man she briefly dated at age 20, and who is the only non-relative to get a chapter in Austen's Wikipedia entry, later became **Lord Chief Justice of Ireland**, another 'king' rank. One could be explained away as a coincidence, but two is just too much.

You might find other suspicious evidence in Austen's sparse biography, or additional peerage connections, but I would like to move on to what she is actually selling us — and make no mistake, sell she does. Not just her own books, but also BBC TV dramas and Hollywood movies with A-listers like Gwyneth Paltrow, Emma Thompson, and Keira Knightley; add to that loose film adaptations such as *Clueless* or Bollywood's *Bride and Prejudice*, as well as an entire cottage industry of derivative 'Jane Austen with a twist' romance novels.



Pride and Prejudice

We'll start with *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's most famous work. The story is about the Bennett sisters' need to find the right bachelors to marry. In a minute, you'll see how this ties in with what Miles calls the 'Men are Pigs' project. But first, a chart of who ends up with whom:

Elizabeth Bennett	-> Darcy (ruling class, richest man in Derbyshire)
Jane Bennett	-> Bingley (ruling class)
Charlotte Lucas	-> Collins (clergy)
Lydia Bennett	-> Wickham (low military)

Elizabeth (the wittiest) and Jane (the sweetest and most beautiful) get men who are completely out of reach for the vast majority of women, real one-percenters who — by modern estimates — make *at least* US\$500,000 per year¹, not from any work, but just from their investments. We know this because, like an accountant, Austen can't go too many pages without mentioning exactly what a character's yearly income is.

But Darcy and Bingley are not just financially far superior to Collins and Wickham, but also as people. The arrogant Darcy is revealed to be a really decent guy, whereas Collins is just a ridiculous buffoon and the initially charming Wickham turns out to be a rogue. Very rich men = very good people, other men = bad people. And so Collins gets the unremarkable Charlotte Lucas (Elizabeth's friend), who marries him out of financial desperation, and Wickham ends up with the silliest and most immature of the Bennett sisters.

In sum, *Pride and Prejudice* has taught many generations of impressionable young women not only that the man representing Christianity the most is an idiot, but also that they should marry a man who, for all intents and purposes, might as well be a mythical creature to them, and to disdain other bachelors, i.e., everyone. That's like telling young men not to settle for the nice girl-next-door, but to hold out for that supermodel because they deserve no less.

Miles: Very true. It is a complete fantasy to think that Darcy would have married Elizabeth, and the double wedding at the end is doubly fantastic. That said, the book did make an extremely watchable BBC miniseries, and I have to think that young ladies—if any that can be called ladies still exist—would be harmed less by watching it than by watching *Breaking Bad* or *American Idol* or *Mindhunter*. After all, it does at least sell men and marriage as highly desirable, which is a step in the right direction. I think such period pieces may also be useful in that they give young women the idea that elegance is something to be desired, along with manners and good breeding. Such productions are one of the last things preventing culture from falling into absolute vulgarity. For myself, I would much rather meet a woman who liked period pieces than one who liked *Fight Club* or *Pulp Fiction*.

Mansfield Park

It speaks to Jane Austen's status as a holy cow that it took almost two centuries

before there was a major debate about whether there was something sinister to her creation. As with any other author, there were occasional accusations of that kind even with Austen, but they were easily drowned out by all the favorable criticism. However, what happened in 1993 was an earthquake — at least by the sedate standards of the Austen community — that just couldn't be ignored. Edward Said, a Palestinian and a cultural outsider, pointed out that the pretty setting of the estate that gave the novel its title was built on the blood, sweat, and tears of slaves on sugar plantations in Antigua — we learn of Sir Thomas Bertram's trips to that island in passing, but Austen doesn't write about what happens there. Should we fault her for that? Is slavery acceptable to Austen? There was much arguing for and against, with quite testy reactions to Said (see for example Ibn Warraq's response quoted on *Mansfield Park's* Wikipedia page).

Although this is meant to be an anti-Austen paper, I'm not sure if not writing explicitly about Antigua really is a certain mark against this author. I find another criticism that failed to cause a tumult a more definite problem:

The American scholar, John Halperin (1975), was particularly negative, describing *Mansfield Park* as the "most eccentric" of Austen's novels and her greatest failure. He attacked the novel for its inane heroine, its pompous hero, a ponderous plot, and "viperish satire". He described the Bertram family as appalling characters, full of self-righteousness, debauchery and greed, personal financial advantage being their only interest.[5] He complained that the scenes set in Portsmouth were far more interesting than those in *Mansfield Park*, and *that having consistently portrayed the Bertram family as greedy, selfish and materialistic, Austen, in the last chapters, presented life at Mansfield Park in idealised terms.*[6] (Wikipedia, my italics)

If we take this statement as the truth, then Austen once more short-circuits our moral compass. In *Pride and Prejudice*, a bachelor's morals were equal to his finances, and now in *Mansfield Park*, life with the rich is paradise, no matter how nasty they are. Money makes everything right, it seems.

Persuasion

This is generally known as the novel in which we learn not to give up on a love match, because things might still work out a few years later. But let's consult Wikipedia for a plot summary:

The story begins seven years after the broken engagement of Anne Elliot to then Commander Frederick Wentworth. When 19 years old, Anne fell in love and accepted a proposal of marriage from the young naval officer. Wentworth was considered clever, confident, ambitious, and employed, but his low social status made Anne's friends and family view the Commander as an unfavourable partner. [...] Several years later, the Elliot family is in financial trouble [...] Frederick Wentworth who is by now a wealthy naval captain [...] Anne and Wentworth reconcile, affirm their love for

each other, and renew their engagement. [...] Anne settles into life as the wife of a Navy captain.

The ‘money solves all ills’ theme is getting repetitive, isn’t it? This is now the third time in a row that young women are trained to set their romantic sights on super-capitalists, men who have laid up treasures on earth rather than in heaven: first we had the trust fund babies of yore in *Pride and Prejudice*, then the son of an imperialist exploiter of slave labor in *Mansfield Park*, and now a state-sanctioned pirate richly rewarded for engaging in plunder and hostile takeovers of enemy vessels (“[...] from what he had once heard Captain Wentworth himself say, was very sure that he had not made less than twenty thousand pounds [US\$ 2,000,000] by the war.”). All this seems very harshly put, especially given the many positive qualities Austen assigns to her characters: Bingley and Darcy are often kindness and charity personified, Edmund Bertram equally so, even intending to become a clergyman and thereby balancing out Collins’s negative portrayal a little, and finally Wentworth who is comically called a most pleasant man in the very same sentence describing him as a war profiteer, just quoted above. But isn’t this exactly the same kind of PR today’s media professionals do for the super-rich?

The Establishment’s ultimate stamp of approval

In conclusion, I want to say that I also researched *Sense and Sensibility* as well as *Emma*, but was simply not astute enough to come up with any additional observations that would add value to this paper. Nevertheless, I believe I managed to outline a few serious problems with the way Jane Austen makes us think about our relationships.

Miles here for a wrap-up. I allowed my anonymous writer to have his say here, since I think he makes some good points. Although I have previously admitted I like period pieces in general, and that I like the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*, and the 1996 *Emma*, I like them as fantasies, realizing they have few points of contact with reality. In my opinion, that is the greater problem with Austen and these other writers: it is not so much that they are blackwashing men or extolling money, it is that they are presenting a skewed and often idyllic view of the British upper classes. From my extensive research, we have discovered the peers are not like that at all—just the opposite in fact. So Austen's main project was *whitewashing* the nobles, making them appear to be handsome, charming, and gallant or beautiful, witty, and moral when they were not. Yes, she has a few bad eggs among her characters, but even they are not too bad. They tend to be climbers like Wickham or rakes like Willoughby, but none are outed as being the sort of towering psychopaths we know the nobles really were and still are. And it is not just that they were and are obsessed with wealth, it is that if we look closer, we see they were and are criminals and liars of the highest order, willing to subjugate, oppress, and even murder huge

numbers of people to get what they want. These families aren't composed of Darcys and Bingleys, they are composed of scumbags like John of Gaunt, George Leveson-Gower, or Bill Gates.

For instance, Darcy's home in Derbyshire is based on Chatsworth House, the ancestral manor of the Cavendishes, Dukes of Devonshire. At the time of Austen, the Duke was the 5th, William Cavendish, who married Georgiana Spencer. You will remember that in the novel, Darcy's sister is named Georgiana. Spencer was the daughter of John Spencer, 1st Earl Spencer, an ancestor of Lady Diana. So the idea that this Cavendish would marry the daughter of gentry with a dowry of £50 is absurd. His father had also married the daughter of an Earl (Boyle), and the 7th Duke would marry the daughter of an Earl (Howard). More to the point, this 5th Duke was Lord High Treasurer of Ireland, and an honest man has never held that position. He made huge amounts of money from copper mines, which of course polluted the rivers and countryside and employed and underpaid thousands of workers, most of whom died early of want and wear. He and Georgiana Spencer lived in a *menage a trois* with Lady Foster, Georgiana's lover. Georgiana later began an affair with the Earl Grey, and had his child. Cavendish's son with Georgiana was gay, not surprisingly. Georgiana soon became dissipated, being famous for her gambling, alcoholism, drugs, and numerous affairs. So she was not a nice lady. Georgiana's brother George, the 2nd Earl, was Home Secretary under Lord Grenville, meaning he was a top spook, running many of hoaxes and money-making schemes of the time. Cavendish's father, the 4th Duke, was Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury, ie another top crook.

So that's who these people really were and are, not the charming heroes and heroines of the period pieces. The period pieces may be fun to watch, and sometimes give us something to aspire to, but just remember that they are used to repackage and resell the aristocracy. Their use to the peers is mainly as a rewriting of history, making ugly, immoral, and charmless people appear beautiful, gracious, and high-minded.

1 <http://jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol36no1/toran/> Darcy actually made over \$1 million per year in today's dollars.