

**Jane Austen Readers Group  
July 8, 2012**

Home of Kim Higgins

**Jane Austen, a Liberal or a Conservative?  
Discussion leaders: Elaine Blatt and Bill Boyd**

**Agenda**

<u>Item</u>	<u>Leader</u>
The meaning of “liberal” and “conservative”	Bill
A short history of ideas during Jane’s life	Elaine
Summary of the thesis of Johnson’s Women, Politics and the Novel	Bill
Summary of the thesis of Butler’s War of Ideas	Elaine
The status of women in Regency England (pages 1 – 4)	Bill
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**The Meaning of “Liberal” and “Conservative”**

Was Jane Austen a conservative or a liberal? Or maybe to be more precise, since these words did not mean the same thing 200 years ago as they do now, did she favor maintaining the status quo or did she favor reform of the political and social structure of English society?

**Ideas Debated in Jane’s Time**

In Jane’s time there were raging debates about a number of social and political questions. A popular movement to abolish slavery dated from at least 1783. In 1807 an Act of Parliament established a naval squadron to patrol the Atlantic and suppress the African slave trade by freeing slaves from transport ships and fining the ship owners. However, the Act did not abolish slavery in the British Empire. This would not happen until 1833.

The ongoing debate on how much power should be vested in Parliament and how much should remain with the King continued, as did the debate on free trade versus trade regulation and taxation.

During Jane's lifetime the Industrial Revolution gained momentum and the middle class emerged and grew in numbers and influence. Change was unstoppable but some efforts to reform British laws, government and society met stiff resistance. Some of the resistance was a reaction to the excesses of the French Revolution (1789 to 1799) and the associated Reign of Terror (1793 to 1794).

Some of the hottest disputes in the literature of Jane Austen's time concerned the status and place of women in English society which is discussed below.

### **The Status of Women in English Society During Jane's Lifetime**

Wikipedia summarized the place of women in English society as follows:

English law defined the role of the wife as a '*feme covert*', emphasizing her subordination to her husband, and putting her under the 'protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord'. Upon marriage, the husband and wife became one person under the law, as the property of the wife was surrendered to her husband, and her legal identity ceased to exist. Any personal property acquired by the wife during the marriage, unless specified that it was for her own separate use, went automatically to her husband. If a woman writer had copyright before marriage, the copyright would pass to the husband afterwards, for instance. Further, married women were unable to draft wills or dispose of any property without their husbands' consent.

Women were often limited in what they could inherit. Males were more likely to receive real property (land), while females with brothers were sometimes limited to inherited personal property, which included clothing, jewelry, household furniture, food, and all moveable goods. In an instance where no will was found, the English law of primogeniture automatically gave the oldest son the right to all real property, and the daughter only inherited real property in the absence of a male heir. The law of intestate primogeniture remained on the books in Britain until 1925.

Aware of their daughters' unfortunate situation, fathers often provided them with dowries or worked into a prenuptial agreement pin money, the estate which the wife was to possess for her sole and separate use not subject to the control of her husband, to provide her with an income separate from his.

In contrast to wives, women who never married or who were widowed maintained control over their property and inheritance, owned land and

controlled property disposal, since by law any unmarried adult female was considered to be a *feme sole*. Once married, the only way that women could reclaim property was through widowhood.

The dissolution of a marriage, whether initiated by the husband or wife, usually left the divorced females impoverished, as the law offered them no rights to marital property. The 1836 Caroline Norton court case highlighted the injustice of English property laws, and generated enough support that eventually resulted in the [Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882].

Wikipedia, Married Women's Property Act 1882 (footnote references and hyperlinks omitted).

Jane certainly addressed social and political issues in her novels. By far, most of the issues she addressed related to the status and place of women in English society. Every one of her novels looked at societal assumptions about the worth and intelligence of women and the laws that governed them in subtle and not so subtle ways.

How did Jane view the place of women in English society 200 years ago? We might start with a selection from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*:

"She [Catherine] was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame. Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can."

Claudia L. Johnson highlights the following quote from Jane Austen's *Catharine, or the Bower* in her book *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. In it Catharine's Aunt Percival scolds her for doing nothing more than be "the astonished and unwilling object of a silly fellow's impulsive gallantries. The quote illustrates how women's proper behavior was not only of family interest but was considered to be vital to economic health and security of the British nation.

"Profligate as I knew you to be, I was not prepared for such a sight. ... And this is the reward for all the cares I have taken in your Education; for all my troubles and Anxieties; and Heaven knows how many they have been! All I wished for, was to breed you up virtuously; I never wanted you to play the Harpsichord, or draw better than any one else; but I had hoped to see you respectable and good; to see you able & willing to give an example of Modesty and Virtue to the Young people hereabouts. I bought you Blair's Sermons and Coelebs in Search of a Wife, I gave you the key to my own Library, and borrowed a great many good books of my Neighbours for you, all to this purpose. But I might have spared myself the trouble – Oh!

Catharine, you are an abandoned creature, and I do not know what will become of you. I am glad however, she continued softening into some degree of Mildness, to see that you have some shame for what you have done, and if you are truly sorry for it, and your future life is a life of penitence and reformation perhaps you may be forgiven. But I plainly see that every thing is going to sixes and sevens and all order will soon be at an end throughout the Kingdom.”

“Not however Ma’am the sooner, I hope, from any conduct of mine, said Catherine in a tone of great humility, for upon my honour I have done nothing this evening that can contribute to overthrow the establishment of the kingdom.”

“You are Mistaken Child, replied she; the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of it’s [sic] individuals, and any one who offends in so gross a manner against decorum and propriety is certainly hastening it’s [sic] ruin.”

Jane Austen wrote *Catharine, or the Bower* at the beginning and development of the reaction to the French Revolution. The conduct of women became an issue of national security. Women were required “to be amiably weak, retiring, and docile so to assure the authority, the chivalry, even the identity of men.” (Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*.) Women became “the pivotal figure in either the continuance or the annihilation of political order.” *Ibid*. Commentary on the conduct of women is found throughout Jane’s contemporary authors, including Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, who wished to reform society, and Jane West and Hannah More, who wanted to maintain the patriarchal structure with all of its privileges and power.

### **Discussion of Whether Jane Austen Was a Liberal or a Conservative**

What were Jane’s opinions on the social issues of her day.? Since her death and right through R.W. Chapman’s commentary in *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, many commentators denied that she expressed any opinion on these issues at all. “To Chapman, Austen is in the canon not because of her social vision or even because of her formidable artistry, but rather because she had the good fortune to be able and the good taste to be willing to record the elegant manners of her time.” *Ibid*. But Claudia Johnson asserts that too much of Austen scholarship assumes who she is before beginning an analysis of her work and that too many assume Austen was basically a conservative writer who rejoiced in the society she wrote about. She maintains that Jane only appears to be silent on political matters; that she “dismantled myths propounded by [conservative] novelists without seeming necessarily to imply a [reformist] wish to see society radically reconstituted.” So maybe her novels concealed much of her political views, just as 100 plus years later Shostakovich’s music concealed much of his anti-Stalinist views.

To look at this question lets explore some questions each of her six novels raises. We propose to divide our Reading Group into groups of about 10 people. Each group will pick a representative to summarize the conclusions of the group at the end of the discussion. Each group will pick one novel and ask what in the novel supports the theory that Jane wished to retain the structure of society and what in the novel supports theory that Jane wished to reform the social structure.

The outlines below are not meant to be fully explored, but are only meant to provide reminders of elements of the novels that may be relevant to the discussion.

Please note that *Pride and Prejudice* does not provide as much material for discussion of this issue as the other five books and we do not recommend picking it.

### **Northanger Abbey**

1. Conservative ideology maintained that authority figures were generally wise and benevolent and that if a woman acted contrary to the wishes of the man or men who had authority over her, she brought ruin on herself and her family. General Tilney is the authority figure in *Northanger Abbey*. But he is hardly a figure to be admired. What does that say about Jane's view of the absolute authority of the male head of family in English society?
2. Does *Northanger Abbey* caution against allowing daughters to read without strict supervision, as Mrs. Percival does in the quote from *Catharine or the Bower* set out above?
3. Claudia Johnson says *Northanger Abbey* is about "the prerogatives of those who have what Eleanor calls 'real power' and the constraints of those who do not." Henry Tilney believes women have "real power," even though their power is limited to the power to refuse. But is this real power in the face of bullying, which is rampant in *Northanger Abbey* on the part of General Tilney, John Thorpe, James (Catherine's brother) and even Henry Tilney, himself, who is a self-proclaimed expert on the minds of women? Time and time again Catherine is silenced by her "fear of hazarding an opinion" of her own "in opposition to that of a self-assured man," even when she knows she is right. Does this give a clue to Jane's opinion of the society she lived in?
4. What does the closing question in *Northanger Abbey*, set out below, say about Jane's politics?

To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty–six and eighteen is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced that the general's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled, by whomsoever it may

concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.

### **Sense and Sensibility**

1. Claudia Johnson says that *Sense and Sensibility* “exposes how those sacred and supposedly benevolizing institutions of order – property, marriage, and family – actually enforce avarice, shiftlessness, and oppressive mediocrity.” Do you agree? What does that say about Jane’s politics?
2. What do the following elements of *S & S* suggest about Jane’s beliefs about the desirability of reforming English society:
  - a) Although the two heroines of *S & S* eventually find their place in the world, so does coldhearted Lucy Steele, who always appears proper and plays the sycophant to wealth and power. Nor is there any punishment for John Dashwood’s abandonment of his step-mother and two half-sisters.
  - b) *S & S* begins with the impoverishment of Elinor, Marianne and their mother, which is the result of the commonplace succession of property through sons.
  - c) Claudia Johnson says that *S & S* is often seen as a “discussion of female propriety, a quasi-allegorical representation of ‘sense’ and ‘sensibility.’” But she points out that it devotes much of its narrative to the sexual relations gentlemen pursue, particularly in the story of the two Elizas. While these two stories don’t condone failures of female chastity, they highlight the callousness of the ruling class. And the fact that there are two such stories raises the sinister possibility that their stories are commonplace throughout the kingdom.
  - d) Edward forms a destructive early attachment with Lucy Steele out of idleness common to landed gentlemen.
  - e) Willoughby is also a gentleman with the potential to inherit who has nothing better to do with his time than accumulate debt and prey on unsheltered and unprotected women like Eliza and Marianne.
  - f) Johnson points out that “women abused in love are expected to die” or at least to lose their complexions and not be able to catch a good husband. But Marianne doesn’t die and she does find a good husband.

3. A hotly debated topic in Jane Austen's day was whether women ought to reveal, let alone feel or act upon sexual attraction. For conservatives a proper lady did not form an attachment until a parentally approved partner declared himself. How did Jane's heroines, such as Elinor and Marianne and Elizabeth and Jane from *Pride and Prejudice* comport themselves with regard to this question?

### **Pride and Prejudice**

Johnson notes that *P & P* appears to support conservative myths that "established forms cherished rather than prohibited true liberty, sustained rather than disrupted happiness, and safe-guarded rather than repressed individual merit." But is that true? Consider:

1. Elizabeth hardly conforms to proper behavior for one of her sex and rank. When Jane wrote *P & P*, no heroine quite like her had ever appeared in print.
2. Mr. Collins.
3. *P & P* celebrates personal happiness as a valid moral goal and the business of life.
4. Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship "resonates with physical passion."

### **Mansfield Park**

1. Johnson says that *Mansfield Park*'s setting is a great house that exposes a heroine who is the "model of female virtue and filial gratitude to the "unwholesomeness of its moral pretensions." "Austen's enterprise in *Mansfield Park* is to turn conservative myth sour, as she surely need not have done were her allegiances to the world of the country house as assured as is generally agreed. Do you agree or disagree with this analysis? Consider:
  - a) "Sir Thomas seems to perform the duties of a proper father." But many of his actions are tainted. He admits Fanny to *Mansfield*, but only on the "condition that she be made to remember she is not 'a Miss Bertram.'" The family fortunes depend on slave labor. And so on.
  - b) The children of Sir Thomas fear him and to that extent they obey him. But he is often ignorant of what they do and they will do anything they can get away with.
  - c) Lady Bertram spends her days "sitting nicely dressed on a sofa" and pays no attention to her children and is completely oblivious to their activities.
  - d) The extravagance of Tom, the elder son, had driven the family into debt.

- e) As a result, Sir Thomas encourages Maria to marry Mr. Rushworth even though he is aware that she despises him. He offers to call off the marriage but he “stops well short of the candor that could have brought Maria to think twice” about the marriage.
  - f) While the rest of Sir Thomas’s children act in their own interests, it is Fanny who “consistently strives to feel and do as she ought” and “to entrust herself to guardian males.” She discovers her guardians “are too full of their own, invariably wrongheaded plans to think much about her at all.” When Sir Thomas, Edmund and Lady Bertram “collude in Crawford’s unwelcome suit,” Fanny is surprised to learn her wishes do not count for much because she had always denied that she had any wishes of her own.
  - g) When Fanny resists efforts to marry her off, Sir Thomas “radical agendas and ungovernable passions” to Fanny while ignoring what is really going on in his house between Maria and Crawford.
  - h) Crawford, like Mr. Collins, won’t take “no” for an answer for a time.
2. Johnson states that Mansfield Park a novel of “the propriety of benevolence itself, the power structure on which it is premised, and the confidence one is inclined to place in the interests and reliability of those empowered to be benevolent.” Is this right?

### **Emma**

- 1. Is Emma the heroine that more conservative members of Regency society could like? Johnson says no. Consider:
  - a. Johnson says that the subject of Emma is female authority, which makes some of her readers profoundly uncomfortable. Critics have accused Emma of lacking “feminine softness and compliancy” and of having “a dominating and uncommitting personality.”
  - b. In the case of the one traditional bond in Emma’s life, her love for her father, his frailty makes him dependent on her “strength, activity, and good judgment.”
  - c. Emma does not think of her destiny as being determined by the actions of any man.
  - d. Emma says she has “none of the usual inducements” to marriage. “Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want.”
  - e. “Emma is a woman who possesses and enjoys power, without bothering to be demur about it.” Jane Austen “is not embarrassed by power, and she depicts it

with the quiet pervasiveness and nonchalance that suggest how effortlessly she took it and the sentiments relative to it for granted.” Emma says, “I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other.”

f. The power Emma assumes is not only the power to determine her own destiny, but the destinies of others. In so doing, she encroaches on what is considered male turf.

g. With the exception of Emma, all of the people in control in the novel are women: Mrs. Churchill, Mrs. Elton, and Emma herself.

h. Emma’s power is often presented as a problem she must overcome. But critics holding this view complain that her humiliation is “too brief and too private, and that she is never vigorously ‘punished’ for her wrongdoing.” In fact she shows no signs of “reform” at the end of the novel.

2. Johnson notes that “Emma is a world apart from conservative fiction in accepting a hierarchical social structure not because it is a sacred dictate of patriarchy – Mansfield Park spoiled this – but rather because within its parameters class can supersede sex. Thus Emma recuperates a world Austen savages in Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey, in order to explore what was precluded in those novels, the place such a world can afford to women with authority.”

3. Readers often focus on Emma’s mistakes, but Mrs. Weston “considers her judgment worth relying on: ‘where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times’ and “she will never lead any one really wrong; she will make no lasting blunder.”

4. Emma’s often acts for the best. She tends to the poor and afflicted and ranks visits to Miss Bate’s an obligation. She considers “performance of untold acts of kindness a duty attached to her position requiring no announcement or praise.” Compare her conduct to that of Mrs. Elton, whose “exertions of leadership set our teeth on edge because of their insistent publicity.”

5. Emma’s mocking of Miss Bates stands out because it is unusual for her. Generally she is “admirably forbearing.” Even in that one instance, she is responsive to criticism and is “resolute, swift, and feeling in her amends.”

6. Even Emma’s misjudgment of Harriet’s history is not such a big mistake. She is perfectly correct that gentlemen do not all behave as they should and Harriet could very easily have been the illegitimate child of one. Mr. Knightly concedes that Harriet would have made a better wife for Mr. Elton than he deserved or got.

7. Johnson asserts that conservative scholars believe that Emma is brought low at the end of the novel and marriage saves her. Is this so?

- a. Knightly confesses that as a moral censor he is obnoxious: “I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it.”
- b. Knightly is often wrong: He is wrong about Frank Churchill, and Emma’s feelings for Churchill for instance.
- c. Even though Knightly lectures and blames, nothing ever comes of it. He does not threaten to withdraw affection or approval and Emma does not obey him. “Emma dishes out as much [advice] as she gets, and when she does not follow his advice – which is almost always – he does not turn away.
- d. Emma and Knightly actually stand on equal footing. Knightly’s advice is more like friendly directness in the same way Mrs. Garner gives advice to Elizabeth in P & P.
- e. “Knightly, no less than Darcy, is thus a fantastically wishful creation of benign authority, in whom the benefits and attractions of power are preserved and the abuses and encroachments expelled.”

### **Persuasion**

Johnson notes that critical tradition views *Persuasion* as an “autumnal” novel written by an author in the twilight of her life who embraces romantic subjects more tenderly than in her earlier novels. It is a view that is wrong. Among other facts, it ignores Sanditon with its “raucous energy.” It also ignores the fact that Jane did not have the benefit of the knowledge of her impending death.

In looking at *Persuasion* for evidence of Jane’s conservatism or liberality, consider:

- 1. Johnson notes that ridicule of “foolish and financially embarrassed landowners” in *Persuasion* is not new to Jane’s sixth novel. What is new is that they – Sir Walter and Lady Russel - have lost not only their power, but their moral authority for the heroine. For example, Johnson points out that Anne visits Mrs. Smith, a “nobody,” “without informing Sir Walter, let alone seeking his permission,” and “once his disapproval is expressed, it is ignored without fuss.”
- 2. Wentworth is angry at Anne, not because she exhibits too little feminine diffidence, but because she exhibits too much. He is a strong man and he wants a decided, forward and strong wife. “A strong mind, with sweetness of manner, made the first and last of the description” of the qualities he wants in a woman. It is true that the two qualities he seeks are somewhat in opposition to each other, but still, his seeking of strength in a woman is at odds with the qualities often recommended in the conservative novels and conduct books of the day.

3. In *Persuasion*, “female strength is disapproved to the same degree it is desired.” Wentworth does not believe women should be carried on board ships because they are too delicate. Furthermore, “the possibility that women themselves may not consider such journeys a violation of their lovely and amiable natures is obnoxious” to Wentworth. He says that they “have no right to be comfortable on board.”
4. Johnson notes that Mrs. Croft’s “manners are conspicuous by their lack of features construed as feminine, such as bashfulness, roundness, sweetness, and daintiness. She ‘had a squariness, uprightness, and vigour of form, which gave importance to her person’ and ‘a weatherbeaten complexion, the consequence of her having been almost as much at sea as her husband.’” (Citations to *Persuasion* omitted.) Austen writes that she looks “as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her” and that her manners are “open, easy, and decided, like one who had no distrust of herself, and no doubts of what to do; without any approach to coarseness, however, or any want of good humour.”
5. Wentworth has little regard for obligations a woman might owe to parental authority as his “impatience with Anne’s hesitation at nineteen to defy paternal displeasure surely suggests.”
6. Johnson notes that “Lady Russell’s approval of Charles Musgrove’s suit and her championship of William Elliot’s do not testify to her powers of discrimination.”