

from “Austen and Masculinity”

[In this essay from *A Companion to Jane Austen*, E.J. Clery argues that the gendered view of Austen as a “feminine” writer commonly held by nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics overlooks the realism and narrative power of her male characters and their importance in driving her novels’ plots. In portions of the essay largely omitted here, Clery goes on to perform close readings of the men’s roles in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.]

Austen was the first to describe her work as narrowly “feminine.” The famous image of “the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour” appears in her correspondence by way of contrast with the “strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow” written by her 18-year-old nephew (*Letters*: 323). When the Prince Regent’s librarian, the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, an admirer of her writing, urged her to make a clergyman closely resembling himself the hero of her next novel, she refused on the grounds of female incapacity: “Such a Man’s Conversation must at times be on subjects of Science & Philosophy of which I know nothing ... And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress” (*Letters*: 306).

With her humorously self-deprecating excuses, Austen confirms the views of some of her detractors, and seems to subscribe to a strictly gendered division of labor in the literary sphere. And indeed, her practice of adhering in her fiction to what was “knowable” from the perspective of a gentlewoman was far more rigorously maintained than in the work of many other female writers of the time. Ever since Austen published her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, with the attribution (not uncommon at the time) “By a Lady,” readers have responded to the apparently “feminine” limitation in the scope and style of her writing. The *British Critic* of May 1812 drew attention to the “intimate knowledge ... of the female character” and recommended it to “our female friends” (Southam 1968: 40). This gendered view builds through the nineteenth century, giving rise to a plethora of patronizing compliments (Walter Scott, often seen as her earliest champion, is guilty in this respect) and cloying gallantries. Unsurprisingly, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, fearless

explorers of the masculine realm themselves, rebelled against the model of female authorship she represented, emblemized by the “carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden” (Southam 1968: 126).

In the course of the twentieth century, this “sexed” Austen underwent further permutations. The perceived femininity that was once a basis for praise of a qualified kind, now became an occasion for abuse: a phenomenon which Lionel Trilling termed “the sexual objection” (Trilling 1955: 209). Mark Twain’s notorious aversion to her work was explained by Trilling as viscerally gendered:

The *animality* of [his] repugnance is probably to be taken as a male’s revulsion from a society in which women seem to be at the center of interest and power, as a man’s panic fear at a fictional world in which the masculine principle, although represented as admirable and necessary, is prescribed and controlled by a female mind. (Trilling 1955: 209)

H.W. Garrod’s infamous lecture “Jane Austen: A Depreciation” (1928) protested at the marginalizing of men in her field of vision. In 1936 William Empson observed that it was a critical commonplace that “Jane Austen never shows men apart from women” (Southam 1987: 298). D.W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick connected her brilliant use of irony and satire with her own exclusion from a “normal” heterosexual destiny.¹ The masculinist reaction to Austen, that ultimately had the effect of presenting her as a far more complicated and oppositional figure than had previously been allowed, prepared the way for feminist reclamation. In much feminist criticism, Austen’s identification with the woman’s point of view is simply assumed: a new and more celebratory variation on the “sexed” Austen (e.g., Kirkham 1983, Sulloway 1989, Kaplan 1992).

And yet there is a neglected tradition in the early reception of Austen that challenges her identification with the feminine. The praise of Austen’s very first reviewer (in the *Critical Review* in 1812) for her “knowledge of character” relates to the depiction of male characters in particular (Southam 1968: 35–6). The comparison with Shakespeare first appears in Richard Whately’s review of Austen’s posthumous works in the *Quarterly Review* in 1821:

Slender and Shallow, and Aguecheek, as Shakspeare has painted them, though equally fools, resemble one another no more than Richard, and Macbeth, and Julius Caesar; and Miss Austin’s [*sic*]

1 On this interpretation and the “queer” tradition of Austen appreciation, see Johnson (1996 and 1997); cf. Miller (2003).

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Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Rushworth, and Miss Bates, are no more alike than her Darcy, Knightley, and Edmund Bertram. (Southam 1968: 98)

Scott had already drawn attention to Austen's minutely naturalistic "fools"; what is intriguing here is the high praise for the compelling and diverse characterization of the heroes: Knightly and Edmund Bertram on a par with Macbeth and Julius Caesar. Thomas Babington Macaulay likewise places her next to Shakespeare in the finely discriminated depiction of character, and for *his* examples he takes "four clergymen, none of whom we should be surprised to find in any parsonage in the kingdom, Mr Edward Ferrars, Mr Henry Tilney, Mr Edmund Bertram, and Mr Elton": "Who would not have expected them to be mere insipid likenesses of each other? No such thing"; they are differentiated by "touches so delicate, that they elude analysis" (Southam 1968: 123).

These appraisals represent an "unsexed Austen" and evoke a lost way of reading her, attuned to a quality of hyperrealism in her male characters, and especially the portrayal of young men beginning to make their way in the world. Writing to Clarke, Austen insisted that she was unqualified to depict the professional and intellectual world of men. But the evidence of her biography shows that this modesty was disingenuous. She had in fact a remarkably wide experience of men's lives and men's work. She grew up in a household centered on the formation of men. Her mother and father ran a small boarding school for boys, and these lodgers were treated as part of the family (Tomalin 2000: 24–33). She was the sister of six brothers, and remained closely involved in the lives and careers of five of them throughout adulthood, also taking an active interest in her older nephews.

Much remains to be done towards reconstructing the masculine life-world on which Austen's writing draws. The turn towards a historicist view of the novels from the 1970s onwards has inevitably done something to fill the gap, since history, as Catherine Morland observed, tends to foreground the doings of men. When critics investigate Austen's engagement with the ideas and events surrounding the French Revolution they restore some of the context of men's public activity that had previously been left out of the reckoning, even if this is not a stated aim (Butler 1975, Roberts 1979). Recent studies showing the relevance of Regency politics (Sales 1994) and wartime patriotism (Johnson 1995a, Southam 2000), also indicate Austen's subtle attention to masculine identities. We are gradually acquiring a fuller knowledge of the intellectual and professional

affiliations of Austen's male relations (Collins 1994, Southam 2000, Knox-Shaw 2004).

In Austen's novels, men are faced with choices. The marriage plot is also a plot of vocation. Even if a young man has independent means, he must learn to fully embrace his responsibilities as a landowner, which includes a domestic establishment. If plot alone were taken into consideration any of the novels could be reconceived as fables of male self-realization. An heir to a large fortune is frustrated by his state of idleness, and longs to find a vocation. He eventually acquires a living as a country pastor and a penniless but loving wife (*Sense and Sensibility*). A young landowner is isolated by his wealth and rank, and only finds happiness when he recognizes his social responsibilities, begins to mix with a wider circle, and marries beneath him (*Pride and Prejudice*). A clergyman from a high-ranking family, a second son, rejects paternal pressure and marries for love (*Northanger Abbey*). A substantial landowner of middle age, absorbed in his work, becomes jealous when a younger man begins paying attention to the female neighbor he has known all his life, and is galvanized into making a proposal (*Emma*). A serious young man is torn between his desire to become a clergyman and his attraction to a lively fashionable woman who baulks at the idea of being a parson's wife. He eventually breaks with her and marries his sober cousin instead (*Mansfield Park*). An aspiring naval officer fails to marry the woman he loves, due to the snobbery of her family. Through bravery and good luck, he achieves wealth and status and wins her back (*Persuasion*).

These are the stories that are, and are not, told in Austen's six completed works. They are not subplots, but they function in counterpoint to the dominant strand of the narrative featuring the consciousness and feelings of the heroine. The exigencies of these male destinies drive forward the female plot, though in understated—perhaps one could better say *unstated*—ways. All the lacunae that distinguish the heroine's plot, the silences, the frustrations, the mysteries, the periods of waiting and hoping and agonizing, arise from the lack of knowledge about the development of the hero's plot, an ignorance shared by the heroine, the reader, and generally, it would seem, the narrator as well. It is a radical aspect of Austen's art that with few exceptions she denies direct access to the unspoken thoughts and views of her heroes. We are given their conversation, their externalized statements, but only rarely the privileges of their minds.

But let us temporarily set aside this asymmetry in the representation of heroines and heroes, and focus on the plot of vocation, vital both as a formal element and also in determining the social and moral coordinates of the novels. Austen has been called a "war novelist"

(Pritchett 1970). The war with France manifests itself in her novels in the scarcity of men on the home front, the implicit proviso of every courtship; and for those male characters who remain at home, it gives added point and urgency to finding a worthwhile, meaningful occupation as an alternative to military service.¹ War polarizes gender roles and makes them more narrowly prescriptive: men's behavior, even more than women's, is placed under the spotlight. Every war through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century revives the civic humanist paradigm of masculinity, which elevates the military function above other more effeminate civilian occupations, and generates moral panic about the growth of selfish individualism in a refined commercial society. We find this gendered moral framework, which might be termed a "masculine ethic," in operation throughout Austen's work, and with increasing force in her later novels, composed after Britain had been at war almost continuously for more than 15 years, during the culminating stages of the campaign against Napoleon.

There has been considerable speculation about the contemporary resonances of the title *Mansfield Park* (for a summary see Wiltshire 2005). But if "Man's field" were nothing more than a pun on male vocation, it would be highly appropriate. Juxtaposed with "Park," it encapsulates the central tension in the novel between occupation and leisure. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen had contrasted the delusory "manly beauty" of the selfish and dissolute Willoughby with the genuinely "manly unstudied simplicity" of Colonel Brandon, with his desire of being of service to others (SS: 43, 338). In *Mansfield Park*, the epithet "manly" is reserved for the naval characters, Fanny Price's brother and father. By this measure, the young privileged male civilians struggle to achieve anything that could creditably be called manhood, while the reader quickly learns that the established patriarch, Sir Thomas Bertram, has feet of clay. ...

Looking at *Mansfield Park*, or indeed any of the other novels, we can establish that Austen had a great deal to say about masculinity, that she excelled at depicting male characters, even that she subscribed to a masculine ethic that underpinned her portrayal of social mores and historical change. But ultimately all of this must be weighed in the balance with her approach to form, and her gradual refining of a feminine aesthetic.

Austen is the founder of the modern romance narrative, as the first to recognize the extraordinary narrative power of keeping the hero's point of view in reserve. The suspense surrounding the hero's

1 On the wartime "vocational crisis" as it affects the work of male poets, see Bainbridge (2003, esp. pp. 99–119).

feelings and intentions drives the story forward in a way unequalled by shipwrecks, bandits, abductions, or eerie sounds. The precise method by which Austen develops the hero as enigma is a topic that has barely been broached. The ideological corollary of this technique—that, as Robert Miles nicely puts it, “Austen regards the feminine self as our ‘default state’”—has been assumed more often than it has been investigated (Miles 2003: 120). At any time the reception of Austen by men must be a sensitive measure of anxieties about the boundaries of masculinity, and the degree to which the male reader can tolerate a feminocentric definition of humanity. ... (2009)

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1 This list has been excerpted to include only references relevant to the material reprinted here.

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