Jane Austen: New Perspectives

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Edited by Janet Todd

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JANE AUSTEN
NEW PERSPECTIVES

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and unrefined—sketch. For never was the "sparkle of confident intelligence" so plainly shown in a *lady* novelist, and there is every reason to think that Austen was well aware of the feminist implications of such an open and unashamed display of it.

Margaret Kirkham
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NOTES

1. Henry Austen, "Biographical Notice of the Author," prefixed to the first (posthumous) edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion,* 1818; reprinted in R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Novels of Jane Austen* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931–34).
2. Quoted in Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), p. 93.
3. R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen, Facts and Problems* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), pp. 140–45.
4. The Reverend R. Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females,* 1798.
5. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* Chapter 5, Section IV.
6. Item 16 in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 100.
7. Ian Watt, Introduction to *Jane Austen. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 12.
8. Ibid., p. 4.
9. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975).
10. Arnold Kettle, "Jane Austen: *Emma*" in David Lodge, ed., *Emma* (Nashville: Aurora Publications [Casebook Series], 1970), p. 102.
11. Lionel Trilling, "*Emma* and the Legend of Jane Austen," originally the introduction to the Riverside edition of *Emma;* also included in the *Casebook,* p. 154.
12. Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical History of Jane Austen's Writings," *Scrutiny,* 1, 1944.

Jane Austen and the Conflict of Interpretations

To discuss Jane Austen in the context of her literary predecessors is, at some point, to raise questions about historical criticism, its relation to other forms of criticism practiced today, and its claims to be, if not the only, then the best access to objective literary meanings.[1] As the recipient of diverse and contradictory interpretations, Jane Austen is, in fact, an exemplary focus for such questions. Consider some recent studies. In 1975, Marilyn Butler confidently proposed that Jane Austen was a thoroughly orthodox author, of a distinctively anti-Jacobin kind, whose fiction gave "flesh to the conservative case as no one else had done except Burke."[2] Her argument has not received universal assent. In fact, critics since 1975 have often disagreed, though with no unanimous voice. Julia Prewitt Brown considers Austen as revolutionary an author "in her own way" as Mary Wollstonecraft, and argues that her morals have "anthropological" rather than social or historical roots.[3] Susan Morgan views Austen, not in the context of her eighteenth-century predecessors, but in the context of her contemporaries, the romantic poets, and she argues that her central concerns are neither social nor ethical but "epistemological."[4] Bernard Paris applies Karen Horney to Jane Austen and discovers neurotic character traits behind the rhetorical and thematic unities of her fiction.[5] And Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar stress the early works, which, because they lack the "organic camouflage" of the mature novels, offer a more direct measure of the depth of Austen's alienation from the patriarchal society in which she was compelled to live.[6]

It is a curious situation, this conflict of interpretations, the more curious for the lack of reflection it has elicited from readers of Austen criticism. We seem willing, on the one hand, to entertain the most

contradictory of proposals—Jane Austen was at home in her culture; she seethed with repressed anger—or, on the other, to adopt positions of dogmatic repudiation—Jane Austen *was* at home in her culture; her regulated hatred has been *vastly* exaggerated—but not to seek to understand the existence of the contradictory interpretations in themselves. Why do contradictory interpretations exist? And how are we to evaluate disagreements among interpreters?

Following one line of skeptical thinking, we might argue as follows: literary meanings cannot be definitively recovered as a function of the historical moment, nor can they be definitively analyzed as a formal property of the text; instead, literary meanings are everywhere and always a function of the institutional model (the intellectual "pre-understanding") brought to bear on a work.[7] The merit of such an argument is obvious; at a stroke, it explains the current plurality of readings of Austen. By bringing anthropological, romantic, post-Freudian, and feminist expectations to Austen's novels, critics have been able to come up with anthropological, romantic, post-Freudian, and feminist readings. And, beyond its value as explanation, the skeptical argument has the merit of according with recent criticisms or redefinitions of the "classic": far from valuing a work for its ability to enshrine universal truths in pleasing and complex form, critics from various standpoints have valued works for their ideological reticence—or "hesitation," or "undecidability"—and for their consequent openness to an indefinite variety of productive interpretations.[8]

Whatever the merits of this line of argument, historical critics are likely to have problems with it and, even if they grant that any interpretative "understanding" implies and depends upon some form of "pre-understanding," they are likely to claim superior truth for the frame of pre-understanding they bring to Austen's texts. That is, even as they concede the possible *significance* of "anachronistic" criticism, they are likely to claim priority for the *meaning* that is disciplined by a recognition of intellectual and generic contexts and by an attempt to recover the author's intentions, conceived of in other than superficial ways.[9]

How compelling is a historical case of this kind? Several considerations give us pause. E. D. Hirsch's celebrated distinction between meaning and significance, which so conveniently cuts the Gordian knot of critical disagreement for some critics, is not exactly homologous with his other distinctions between "historicist" and "anachronistic" interpretation. As a "dimension of hermeneutics," historicism, like "anachronism" (or the imposition of later and alien frames of expectation upon historical texts), is vulnerable to theoretical objections. Which is not to say that it is *equally* vulnerable. Hirsch is obviously more sympathetic to a historicist

like Schleiermacher than he is to an anachronist like Heidegger. Even so, when in *Aims of Interpretation* he argues on behalf of the recovery of authorial intention in a historical context he does so on ethical, not theoretical grounds.[10]

In the second place, when one turns to the historical contexts which, critics have claimed, illuminate Jane Austen's intentions, one discovers a rather broad range of proposals, and the question arises as to which context allows the best access to Austen's intended meanings. For Brian Southam (reading *Sanditon)* the best context is a Regency England featuring "improvers" like Repton and Count Rumford and novelists like Thomas Love Peacock and Thomas Skinner Surr.[11] For Marilyn Butler it is the war of ideas between Jacobin and anti-Jacobin writers of the 1790s. For C. S. Lewis we breathe the air of the *Rambler* and the *Idler* in Austen's novels.[12] For Gilbert Ryle the best context is the ethics of Shaftesbury, for Philip Drew the theology of Bishop Butler.[13] For Douglas Bush, the context extends to an even wider and more distant past: nothing less than the Christian humanism of Spenser and Milton, as well as of Johnson and Burke.[14] And to all these intellectual contexts one must add the studies that have more narrowly focused on Austen's literary predecessors, novelists in the Richardson–Burney tradition, Richardson himself.[15] Clearly, there is a wide variety of contextual possibilities of pre-understanding, permitting a variety of interpretative emphases.

A literary historian might well counter that the existence of a variety of contexts is not damaging to the historical case, since various interpretations may be complementary and cumulative as regards meaning. There is considerable merit to this time-honored assumption of literary historiography. The studies mentioned and, until recently, historical scholarship generally, tend to concur in the discovery of a moral and conservative author, who is as respectful of such inherited values as sense and prudence, properly defined, as she is accepting of such social facts as the rule of primogeniture. Even so, there are frictions among various historical approaches, as I shall note presently, and the problem of multiple *historical* contexts for interpretation remains a real one. There is an undoubted interest in an approach to Austen's novels via Richardson's fiction, and an equally undoubted interest in an approach via the fiction of the anti-Jacobins. But it may be doubted whether these approaches, and the interpretative results they obtain, may simply be added to one another in a process conducing to the goal of interpretative truth and completion.

An even greater problem for the goal of consensus regarding Jane Austen's meaning (here considered in terms of the disposition she displays toward her inherited culture and its values) is the persistence in

Austen studies of an "alternative" critical tradition. Recent Austen criticism has often continued the "subversive" strain of Reginald Farrer, D. W. Harding, and Marvin Mudrick. In a related sense (Paul Ricoeur's), such criticism is a criticism of "suspicion."[16] Seldom explicitly Marxist, Nietzschean, or Freudian in its argument (Bernard Paris's carefully argued post-Freudian approach is the exception rather than the rule), such criticism nevertheless adopts, in however filtered a form, the iconoclastic procedures of Ricoeur's three great critics of suspicion. Thus, it is suspicious in that it distrusts the formal unities of her texts (her "verbal icons"), preferring to discover her real intentions behind the countercathectic or ideological screens of her moral rhetoric. Nor can such criticism always be labeled anachronistic. In the 1970s, indeed, a school of feminist criticism has returned to Austen's historical world to tell a very different story from the official one, a story in which Austen's novels presage an egalitarian sexual ideology and in which her characters penetrate to the secrets of patriarchal rule.[17]

Such arguments, some literary historians may feel, are misguided, but they can hardly be dismissed out of hand. The sheer persistence of "subversive" criticism suggests to reasonable people that there is a textual basis for "suspicious" views, and, by referring to recent theories of "textuality," we may perhaps understand both why suspicious criticism exists and will continue to exist *and* why historical criticism should take it into account.

Jane Austen's novels have no single contextual origin; they show traces and residues of many earlier texts. One can track her everywhere in Richardson's snow, but if Addison, Johnson, Cowper, and Burke had their own from her, there are (one might say, echoing Dryden) few serious thoughts that are new in her. Her novels—their plots, themes, characters, values—are "overdetermined," the result of her more or less conscious collaboration with an indefinite number of earlier texts. And the consequence of this textual sedimentation is inevitably a certain indeterminacy of meaning. There is "a surplus of signification" in her texts, permitting the reception of various "healing" messages.[18] Thus it is that she can speak therapeutically to Romantic scholars and to feminists, though for most historical critics she is neither Romantic nor feminist. The former simply do not hear the conservative signals in the text; they are too busy hearing other signals. Nor, as already suggested, is this simply a matter of their foisting an unhistorical framework on Austen's novels. Even in historical terms, the novels offer an "overflow of possibilities," so that any reading, considered as a Gestalt selectively constructed from textual evidence, will exist in the presence of other

potential emphases, even in the presence of "alien associations."[19] What might seem a dangerous individualism in the context of a villain like Lord James Marauder (in Lucas's *The Infernal Quixote*) may be read as an admirable individualism if the context chosen is that of a Grandisonian "patrician hero," whose insufferably complacent virtue needs and receives its comeuppance.

Like all authors who enter the textual labyrinth, then, Jane Austen speaks with many voices, and her messages are more "equivocal" than the Chicago critics would have us believe.[20] But where do we go from this recognition? If her novels fail to achieve "univocal" certainties, do they leave us with radically ambiguous or undecidable possibilities of meaning? Does the "intertextual" character of her fiction imply the death of Jane Austen, considered as the voice of a coherent social and moral vision? And the birth of a fortuitous textuality, in which Austen can be "Miltonic" or a precursor of Simone de Beauvoir, depending on where one enters her discourse and how one writes her story?

A growing number of critics, I suspect, would answer yes to these questions, and welcome the availability of Jane Austen's texts to *écriture* and deconstruction. Within current protocols two responses are to be expected from historical critics. Each is a valid response, but neither comes close to resolving the question of the conflict of interpretations. First, it may be pointed out that while intertextuality may be a new term it is hardly a recent discovery, nor is it a concept that has always caused anxiety in the past. Jane Austen may not have her meaning alone, but she remains a domestic version of T. S. Eliot's authentic poet, writing with a good deal of eighteenth-century literature in her bones. In a more Augustan sense, she invades authors like a monarch, and what might be theft in others is victory in her. This is especially true, as Jocelyn Harris has most recently shown, of her relations with Richardson.[21] When we consider, for example, the Pemberley scenes in the first chapter of the third volume of *Pride and Prejudice* we may observe that Jane Austen's talent is not burdened by the past but liberated into "originality." The housekeeper's praise of the master, the view of the tastefully improved grounds from the windows of the house, and the tour of the picture gallery where the hero at a younger age is on display, are all coded sequences "lifted" from *Sir Charles Grandison*. Yet the visit to Pemberley radically changes Elizabeth's view of its owner, rather than simply confirming an admiration already arrived at, as in the instance of Harriet at Grandison Hall. And Mrs. Reynolds' remarks about Darcy's good nature provide new information on the hero's character, rather than simply adding more evidence that he is a paragon. What had been inert in Richardson becomes

dynamic in Austen, and what had been a somewhat redundant illustration of character becomes, in rhetorical terms, a brilliant pivot of plot and themes.

A second response, equally confident that Jane Austen's voice can be separated from its various textual inheritances, may seek to establish a legitimate author by correcting what it takes to be the excesses or errors of anachronistic or suspicious criticism. Recent years have, in fact, produced proposals which, taken out of context, are enough to induce apoplexy in a Janeite (in context they often have an unimpeachable logic). There have always been, of course, critical voices claiming that despite Jane Austen's intentions, or in keeping with her real but suppressed feelings, Fanny Price is an insufferable prig and Marianne Dashwood is the real heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*. Others have argued that, far from being humiliated, Emma Woodhouse is not even morally educated in any convincing way. Recent critics have often buttressed such proposals.[22]

Others have made even more polemical arguments. It has been argued, for example, that Henry Tilney is a misogynist and Mrs. Norris a surrogate of her author; that Elizabeth Bennet is a critic of entailed estates, and that Anne Elliot is a critic of a patriarchal society. Such arguments, often made with verve and conviction, deserve to be aired and evaluated, but it has been a feature of much recent criticism not to engage dialectically with opposing views. Often the opportunities are there but not seized. There is, for example, an interest in common between two studies that in most respects are diametrically opposed. I refer to Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (pp. 237–42) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (pp. 160–66). Each study notes in Austen's fiction a thematic opposition between speech (or noise) and silence, or between bustle and stillness (or lethargy). But their evaluations of Austen's dialectic differ widely, as a brief summary may indicate. For Butler, Fanny Price's "silences are the appropriate social demeanour of the Christian heroine" (p. 240), and, despite a certain rhetorical failure in characterization, Austen says what she wants to say, which is that traditional religious orthodoxy (associated with order, silence, Mansfield Park, and Edmund Bertram) is to be preferred to a modern worldly subjectivity (associated with noise, bustle, Portsmouth, and the Crawfords). For Gilbert and Gubar, by contrast, Fanny "resembles Snow White not only in her passivity but in her invalid deathliness, her immobility, her pale purity" (p. 165). For the novel to be authentic, they suggest, her silence needs to be integrated with Mary Crawford's outspokenness; in this way Austen's self-division—her commitment to wit

and the imagination, on the one hand, and her guilty sense that wit and the imagination are unfeminine on the other hand—could be accommodated in a dialectic of emerging self-consciousness; but integration does not of course occur, and as Fanny is destined to follow the example of the "corpse-like" Lady Bertram at the end of the novel, and her potential "sister," Mary, is expelled from the park, Jane Austen's usual accommodation fails, the cost of repressing wit is exposed, and the fictional split implies a split in the author's personality. This split is symptomatic of a society that requires women to be silent rather than noisy, to learn "the intricate gestures of subordination" (p. 163) rather than retain the freedom enjoyed in adolescence.

Even thus crudely summarized, these studies may be seen to represent a clear opposition between historical criticism and a criticism that is at once anachronistic and suspicious. Both studies achieve strong "understandings" that derive from "pre-understandings" of a very different kind. Can they be reconciled? Is one right and the other wrong? Does Butler's approach interpret Jane Austen's "meaning" and that of Gilbert and Gubar her contemporary "significance"? Or, taken together, do these studies support the skeptical argument that literary meanings are the consequence of the conceptual models applied to textual evidence?

I don't think we have begun to answer such questions.[23] My own sense of Jane Austen, shaped in an atmosphere respectful of historical and formalistic methodologies, is close to that of Marilyn Butler, and, in reading *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, I am persuaded that historical scholarship may play a corrective role vis-à-vis certain anachronistic readings; throughout this excellent study there is a rich fund of evidence for such corrections. By setting Austen's values and attitudes against those of the sentimental tradition and the fiction of the Jacobin writers, and by showing how close her responses often are to the anti-Jacobin novelists at the turn of the nineteenth century, Butler provides by far the best measure we have of her author's conservatism. Promiscuous comparisons with *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* carry little force in the light of her findings. Yet whether, in the instance of the present contrast, her argument is decisively more persuasive and compelling may be doubted. Her stress on the "partisan" stance of *Mansfield Park* seems excessive, and in her insistence on partisanship in other novels she disallows not only anachronistic readings but historical readings that view Austen's conservatism in more flexible and liberal terms than she is willing to allow.[24] Moreover, in her conclusion she comes close to identifying Austen's orthodox position at the cost of conceding its lack of significance, its irrelevance, to modern readers. "Her morality is preconceived and

inflexible," she writes, "of a type that may be antipathetic to the modern layman" (pp. 298, 296). Surely this is a high price to pay for the recovery of "meaning" and its separation from "significance."

One could, of course, argue that even in historical terms Austen's conservatism may be read more flexibly and, on the important question of the individual in relation to authority, as granting a much greater degree of spontaneity and freedom than Butler allows. I have argued previously that the theme of laughter is central to the meaning of *Pride and Prejudice*.[25] In the light of the recent work of Keith Thomas, that theme seems to take on even greater relevance.[26] Thomas argues that the association of open laughter with ill-breeding was an attempt by the Augustan aristocracy to establish a supremacy based on a cultural hegemony of manner and deportment as much as on the realities of political and economic power. And having stressed the social, even political, importance of manners—the area, we may say, of Austen's supreme expertise—he goes on to describe how the upper classes distinguished themselves from the rest by their gravity, decorum, and deportment, but also by their ceasing to use folk sayings and proverbs. Though he is not concerned with Jane Austen, and his period is earlier, Thomas's argument bears interestingly on the behavior of both Darcy (all gravity, decorum, and deportment) and Elizabeth, who does, when she wishes, use folk sayings and proverbs as weapons of a kind. When Elizabeth keeps her breath to cool her porridge, or disingenuously mistakes the fuss over Lady Catherine's arrival at Hunsford to be caused by pigs loose in the garden, she in effect challenges the hegemony that Darcy represents and seeks to maintain. But Jane Austen's criticism of the aristocracy in *Pride and Prejudice* is nicely balanced against her exposure of vulgarity in the speech and behavior of Elizabeth's aunt at Meryton and of her sister Lydia; so that her position, far from being that of a leveler, supports certain rural values of the gentry, who feel pressures from above and below.[27]

The social significance of laughter, both as a conservative and as a radical force, increased in post-Reformation England.[28] By the eighteenth century, in the wake of Shaftesbury's *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709), the battle over laughter engaged Addison, Fielding, Warburton, Akenside, Lord Chesterfield, Allen Ramsay, and many others. In 1791, Vicesimus Knox published an essay entitled "On the Ill Effects of Ridicule When Employed as a Test of Truth in Private and Common Life." The whole debate, relevant to much of Austen's fiction, has a special relevance to *Pride and Prejudice*, and not only to the scene at Netherfield, where Miss Bingley and Elizabeth disagree over the question

of whether Darcy is to be laughed at or not. Laughter divides the characters along the lines of the thematic dialectic of noise and silence already referred to; as it is deployed in the novel, laughter dramatically enacts a "position" on the relation of the individual to authority. This position is conservative, but attractively so; it is reached not dogmatically but irenically. It is a position that can be measured against the arguments of a dozen sources from Addison's *Spectator* (e.g., Nos. 494 and 598) to Gisbourne's *Duties of the Female Sex*. As an epigraph for the novel, one might choose a sentence of Lord Kames: "Let us bring ridicule under proper culture if we can, without endeavouring to pull it up by the root."[29] Or one might choose another from *Spectator*, No. 494: "It is not the business of virtue to extirpate the Affections of the Mind, but to regulate them."

To argue thus, however, is not only to attempt to "fine-tune" one historical emphasis with another, it is to claim a special privilege for a certain mode of thematic analysis. When I'm feeling especially protective of Jane Austen, it seems to me that such analysis is the way to truth. To recognize the rich historical texture composing a central theme in her novel is not, it then seems to me, to practice literary archaeology; it is rather to recover the aesthetic strategy of an author considered as a single and trustworthy source of meaning. The motif of laughter is so dramatically integrated into characterization, so well choreographed with other motifs in the dance of her dialogues, that the wonder is not that conflicts are suppressed in her novels, but that they are so well "exposed" and resolved.

But what if, under the guise of protecting Jane Austen, I am really protecting a method of reading, sanctioned by an institution, whose vested interest lies in the control and organization of critical discourse? What if, by positing an author as the origin of a coherent vision, I am blinding myself to what is surplus, or fortuitous, or uncontrolled in her texts? What if, seeking to separate truth from falsity in commentary, I am bringing scientistic expectations to textual material, which will verify far more and falsify far fewer hypotheses than one might think? Such questions, obviously derived from Michel Foucault,[30] are doubtless pitched too high; one finds it difficult to conceive of Austen critics (already so dispersed and fragmented) as engaged in a conspiracy to suppress the free dissemination of textual meanings. Yet there may be enough truth in the questions to give us pause. In another place, Foucault writes of "the author [as] the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."[31] And it may be the case that, faced by texts whose stability and determinacy seem more and more uncertain, critics have projected on Jane Austen the responsibility for an economy of meanings which their own procedures

have initiated and predetermined. If this is so, then it may also be time to question the will-to-truth that characterizes both historical and anachronistic criticism.

Between (or perhaps beyond) the alternatives of a legitimist search for the recovery of meaning and a skeptical acceptance of the view that all interpretations are more or less concealed political interventions, future Austen studies may wish to concern themselves, not with further "readings" of Jane Austen's novels (six chapters of explication preceded by a brief introduction providing a hypothesis), but with the question of what "reading Jane Austen" signifies and entails. They are likely to discover that no easy distinction is to be made between "reading" Jane Austen (being receptive, objective, attentive to rhetorical signals and to informing historical contexts) and "writing" Jane Austen (being productive, subjective, suspicious of rhetoric, anachronistic); that both "reading" and "writing" may be equally intent on the discovery of "truth" and on the appropriation of Austen's name for particular purposes. One need not doubt or deplore that historical criticism will retain its right to correct lazy and ignorant readings (nor doubt that such readings will appear); but one may hope that historical criticism will refrain from staking too proprietary a claim. Future research into her various historical contexts will surely open new perspectives on the fiction, as, I have argued, Keith Thomas's sociology of laughter illuminates a central theme of the novels; but the stress should remain on "open"; and the tendency of historical criticism, especially when it works in alliance with modes of rhetorical and thematic analysis, to close Austen's meanings, to seek to provide a complete and true definition of her vision, should be viewed with reservations. The danger of legitimist criticism, rather like Darcy's threat in *Pride and Prejudice*, is silence; when research is complete and analysis is exhausted, then the truth is known, and no more need be said. Against such authority, assuming passive and obedient reading procedures, there is always likely to be rebellion, taking the form of the delightful laughter of Elizabeth Bennet, or the more raucous, less appealing noise of her sister Lydia.

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NOTES

1. This paper is a slightly revised version of a talk given at the meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Washington, April 10, 1981.
2. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). The quoted phrase is from p. 228, where the context is the description of Sotherton, with its "curious blend of stylization and naturalism."
3. Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). For a more extended consideration, see my review in *Criticism*, 21 (1979): 374–76.
4. Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For a more extended consideration, see my review in *Modern Philology*, 79 (1981): 96–101.
5. Bernard Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels: A Psychological Approach* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978). Contending that Jane Austen is at once conservative, satirical, and detached, Paris argues that the relationship among these stances is to be understood in terms of her conflicts.
6. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979). Quoted phrase is from p. 153. It should be added that not all recent works on Austen are in implicit or explicit disagreement with Marilyn Butler. Two works taking a historical approach and discovering a conservative author are: Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1979), and David Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980); while Lord David Cecil's biography, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (1978; reprinted New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) sees its subject as comfortably rooted in eighteenth-century cultural and moral assumptions.
7. Compare the argument of Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).
8. See, for example, Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (New York: Viking, 1975); Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974); and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1974).
9. Compare the argument of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), especially chapters 1 and 5.
10. See chapter 5, "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics." It should be added that Hirsch's goal is the enlargement of an area of theoretical agreement among critics—an agreement as to principles that are independent of any particular

set of values. Whether interpretation can ever be free of value preferences is precisely the point in question.

11. Brian Southam, "*Sanditon:* The Seventh Novel," in Juliet McMaster, ed., *Jane Austen's Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 1–26.
12. C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," *Essays in Criticism,* 4 (1954): 359–71. See also Peter L. DeRose, *Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson* (Boston: University Press of America, 1980).
13. Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," in B. C. Southam, ed., *Critical Essays on Jane Austen* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 106–22; Philip Drew, "Jane Austen and Bishop Butler," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 35 (1980): 127–49.
14. Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).
15. See, for example, Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939); Henrietta Ten Harmsel, *Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964); Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968); Jocelyn Harris, " 'As if they had been living friends': *Sir Charles Grandison* and *Mansfield Park,*" *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities,* 83 (1980): 360–405.
16. For Paul Ricoeur's distinction between a "hermeneutics of recovery" and a "hermeneutics of suspicion," see his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation,* trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
17. The culmination (thus far) of this school is provided by *The Madwoman in the Attic* (see note 6), especially "Part II. Inside the House of Fiction: Jane Austen's Tenants of Possibility." But the position forcefully argued here has been prepared by such other scholars as Nina Auerbach, "Austen and Alcott on Matriarchy," *Novel,* 10 (1976): 6–26, and Lloyd W. Brown, "The Business of Marrying and Mothering," in Juliet McMaster, ed., *Jane Austen's Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 27–43. Leo Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) seems also to have been a general influence. A comprehensive list of feminist criticism of, or bearing on, Austen would include works by Patricia Meyer Spacks, Elaine Showalter, and Janet Todd.
18. For this structuralist concept, which is also important to the thought of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).
19. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1978), especially Part 3, "The Processing of the Literary Text." Opposing the notion of a "structured prefigurement" in texts, Iser explains how readers typically synthesize meanings by constructing Gestalt groupings that result from a process of anticipation and fulfillment in relation to textual signals. Such Gestalten, however, are not only selective, they are, to a greater or lesser extent, subjective configurations; however dependent on textual authority, therefore, they contain "traces of illusion."

20. Wayne Booth, "Control of Distance in Jane Austen's *Emma,*" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Both of these fine studies exemplify the Chicago insistence that texts are wholes, in which the separate parts contribute to an overall coherent meaning, and that authors (an aesthetic, not biographical term) speak with single, trustworthy voices.
21. See article cited in note 15.
22. Bernard Paris *(Character and Conflict)* argues that the education of Emma Woodhouse may be viewed, in Horneyan terms, as Jane Austen's glorification of self-effacement as a defensive strategy. Susan Morgan *(In the Meantime)* denies that *Emma* is "a book about mature understanding replacing immature fancy. . . . It is about the powers of the individual mind . . . and about how these powers can find their proper objects in the world outside the mind" (pp. 38–39).
23. Similar questions are raised in David Monaghan's introduction to *Jane Austen in a Social Context,* ed. David Monaghan (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981).
24. Marilyn Butler's insistence on Austen's orthodox and anti-individualistic stance in *Pride and Prejudice* leads her not only to dispute the cogent interpretations of Samuel Kliger and Lionel Trilling, but to question also the arguments of Kenneth Moler (in *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion*) regarding Austen's deflation of her "patrician hero," Darcy. The point here is one of emphasis. *Pride and Prejudice* as a conservative work is not endangered by Moler's reading. If the hero's social attitudes are criticized, so too is the heroine's individualism. By minimizing the criticism of the "patrician hero," by considering it as a nonessential vestige of an original burlesque intention (vis-à-vis the heroes of Burney as well as Sir Charles Grandison), Butler overstresses Austen's orthodoxy at the possible cost of making her author's position "antipathetic" to modern readers. It is the mutuality of the concessions made by Elizabeth and Darcy that makes the novel such a satisfying work. Elizabeth's individualism is corrected, but it is not eradicated; it remains as an essential, though nonthreatening, element of Austen's social vision. It may be added that in *The Watsons* Austen portrays another "patrician hero" in Lord Osborne. Like Darcy, he is to be rebuked and educated by the heroine.
25. Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 132–40.
26. Keith Thomas, "The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England," *Times Literary Supplement,* January 21, 1977.
27. Compare David Monaghan's argument in *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision.*
28. See William Darby Templeman, "Warburton and Brown Continue the Battle over Ridicule," *Huntington Library Quarterly,* 17 (1953–54): 17–36; and Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

29. Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (Edinburgh, 1762), II: 57.
30. The questions and language of this paragraph come from Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," Appendix to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 215–37. The translation of the Appendix is by Rupert Sawyer.
31. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 159.

Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World

Literary Critics and Historians

I

Jane Austen observed in *Emma*: "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken."[1] This chastened mood, I think, is appropriate to an examination of the variety of conflicting interpretations of the social world of Jane Austen's novels which is the purpose of this essay.

I come to this task as a social and economic historian and not as a literary critic. My chief interest is the history of English landed society from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Like many other devotees of Jane Austen, I first read her simply for the pleasure of it, which I still do. Then, as a university teacher, I found that I was expected, among my graver duties—for reasons never very clear to me then or afterwards—to attend doctoral examinations of candidates in English literature, some of whom were Austen specialists. This was the beginning of my perplexities. Students of English literature, I found, were little interested in English history—so little interested that my favorite question became: Do you know who George Macaulay Trevelyan was? Unhappily this indifference revealed itself in their discourses on Jane Austen. Some of them, when in need of historical background, invented a sort of bogus history. Some of them on occasion went so far as to invent—the better to further their argument, I would guess—some part of the text of the novels. Or so it seemed to me.

I was thus led to look into Jane Austen scholarship. My initial reaction, I am afraid, was both uncharitable and unwarranted. I began to dwell