



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,  
dated 1804.

# JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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## Education and accomplishments

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As one critic declares, 'All Jane Austen's novels, and many of her minor works, unfinished works and juvenilia, are about education.'<sup>1</sup> They are 'about education', however, in critical and complex ways. Education as usually understood today – schooling in certain skills, practices and bodies of knowledge – formed only part of education as Jane Austen and her contemporaries understood it: a process of socialisation and acculturation based on moral self-discipline and designed to fit the individual for a range of related roles in life, according to sex and rank. Furthermore, during the prolonged national and imperial crisis of Austen's day education became a field of ideological struggle in which the social groups who read Austen's novels – the upper middle class and the gentry – were deeply implicated. Austen's novels are 'about education' because they demonstrate the importance of female education to these social groups and particularly to their material interests in an age of revolutionary change.

Female education had caused increasing concern for over a century. *The Lady's New-Year's Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688) by George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, was reprinted into the late eighteenth century; François de la Mothe Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687) was reprinted several times in English, and enjoyed a revival in Austen's day. Both books prescribe education for moral self-control and social usefulness within family and class. Similar conduct or advice books proliferated after mid-century as female education was implicated in accelerating social change and the national and imperial destiny. The Scottish clergyman James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), reprinted into the early nineteenth century, advised readers to cultivate femininity for moral reform and leadership in the national cause – Britain had just emerged from the Seven Years' War with France. The English clergyman John Gregory urged a more resolutely

middle-class programme in his frequently reprinted *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), advising education for domesticity, moral self-discipline and fortitude in married life.

Women writers joined the debate. Early contributions such as Bathsua Makin's *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of a Gentlewoman* (1677) and Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) were almost forgotten by Austen's day, but Lady Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters* (1761), which advised education for moral fortitude against the inevitability of female suffering, was reprinted into the early nineteenth century. Twice as popular was Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind; Addressed to a Young Lady* (1773), which resumed Makin's and Astell's emphasis on intellectual attainments and moral self-discipline. Such ideas circulated farther in numerous novels of education.<sup>2</sup> One of Jane Austen's favourites was Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4), and Félicité de Genlis's *Les Veillées du château* (1784) circulated widely in French and English, but Austen's immediate model was Frances Burney, who developed the form in *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796). During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic crisis the form became more openly political, with Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1792), Jane West's *The Advantages of Education* (1793), Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* (1796), Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1811) and E. S. Barrett's *The Heroine* (1814). Jane Austen knew most of these.

Such works emphasised moral, ethical and social education,<sup>3</sup> but their underlying concern was women's role in reproducing the dominant economic, social, cultural and political order – the order structuring the world depicted in Austen's novels. In the view of Austen's contemporaries this order was established at the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and consolidated through the long eighteenth century, but was being challenged by radical economic transformation, emergent lower- and middle-class social forces, imperial crisis and global warfare. The dominant order was based on agrarian landed property developed by capitalist practices of investment and improvement and managed by a variety of professions – hence increasing concern with schooling upper- and middle-class boys in professional method and discipline. Jane Austen's brothers received

such schooling, two entering the clergy, two the navy, and one the gentry. These professions are central to Austen's novels, and the Austen sisters were educated to be such men's wives – itself considered a profession by many.

For, although women of the classes depicted in Austen's novels were marginalised in this complex economic and social order, they were increasingly thought essential to maintaining it and to need appropriate education for doing so. Property, in the principal form of the landed estate or other forms, was a family concern in both senses – a matter of family interest and a family enterprise. The upper-class family was a corporate entity dependent on landed property to provide the rents underwriting the family's material prosperity and, more important, its status and power. Middle-class families were similarly situated, on a smaller scale. Stability of the family estate across generations was ensured by primogeniture, or inheritance by the first son (rather than division of the estate among all the sons or all the children), and by entailing the estate, in default of a direct male heir, on the nearest male relative. Judging by her novels, Jane Austen had reservations about these practices. Women's interests were entirely subordinated by them, and women had few property rights in or outside marriage. Yet women were necessary to successful transmission of such property from one generation of men to the next in three related ways – biological reproduction, capital investment and social culture – all directed by education.

First, secure generational transfer of property depended on woman's biological ability to bear a male heir, usually with one or two spares for insurance. Failure to produce a male heir could mean transference of the family concern to a distant male relative; such failure underpins the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Biological ability had to be governed, however, by education that would deter a woman from producing an illegitimate heir, with potentially ruinous contested inheritance. Jane Austen, unlike many contemporary novelists, ignores this possibility to emphasise women's potential moral, intellectual, social and cultural contribution, based on education, to the family estate.

She similarly shifts emphasis in treating women's second major contribution to an estate – bringing capital or property in marriage. All Austen heroines except Emma are almost Cinderellas,

bringing to marriage more of the intellectual, moral and cultural capital accumulated through education than the cash or property necessary for what was called 'improvement' of the estate. Improvement was of two related kinds: investment and expenditure. Investment in infrastructure could increase an estate's productivity and rents and thus its ability to sustain its owners' expenditure on socially symbolic conspicuous consumption. Such consumption, from philanthropy to building, from landscaping to literary patronage, constituted a fashion system of intertwined cultural and social distinction. This system was increasingly exploited by entrepreneurs and professionals, however: never before was there such variety and skilful marketing of goods and services, tempting to extravagant consumption and unbalancing the estate and family economy, as Rushworth plans to do in *Mansfield Park*, as Knightley does not do in *Emma* and as Sir Walter Elliot does in *Persuasion*. Austen's novels illustrate the constant challenge of balancing both kinds of 'improvement'.<sup>4</sup> Austen knew that her chosen literary form was itself considered an article of fashionable consumption and condemned not only as such but also for glamorously representing conspicuous consumption and thereby stimulating desire to participate in it. In response, Jane Austen not only makes novel reading, and reading generally, an index of education and thus of character in her novels, but she makes her novels into a process of education for the reader.

In doing so, she accords with the widespread view that education could both appropriately restrain and properly direct dangerous desires of all kinds, for which women were supposed to bear particular responsibility. This is the third major role of female education in the social order Jane Austen knew. Women were widely regarded as instrumental in conspicuous consumption because they were conventionally characterised as creatures of desire, and moralists warned that their fashionable conspicuous consumption might extend to other excesses, including illicit amours, undermining the family estate and indeed the entire dominant order. A wide range of literature depicted these dangers, blamed fashionable female education for exacerbating them and prescribed 'proper' education as the antidote. In Austen's *Mansfield Park* the fashionably educated Bertrams, Rushworths and Crawfords engage in various extravagances, from improper entertainments through reckless

estate improvements to an illicit amour, while the properly educated Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price undertake the moral, intellectual and cultural renewal of the estate.

Improvement of the family estate for good or ill was also understood as a microcosm of improvement in the national state. Concern over women's role in the family economy and, by extension, the nation at large, had driven the debate on female education for decades, but never more so than during the unprecedented national and imperial crisis that coincided with Jane Austen's writing career. Equal rights for women were asserted during this debate, linked to women's roles in society, culture and the economy and to differences in male and female education. By Austen's day, many families gave sons a professional education, not only in the middle classes, who depended on intellectual and cultural capital, but also in the gentry, who recognised the usefulness of the knowledge, self-discipline and managerial skills afforded by such education. As social critics from Mary Wollstonecraft to Hannah More pointed out, however, females were excluded from such broad intellectual and moral education and instead trained in what were called 'accomplishments.'

These differed from the other elements in female education – basic schooling, household management and religious instruction. Basic schooling comprised practical skills such as literacy and numeracy – by Austen's day girls were being excluded from the few grammar schools that offered them more advanced schooling.<sup>5</sup> Household management included supervision if not participation in domestic needlework, food preparation, the regular but epic activity of washing-day and care of the sick, the young and the aged.<sup>6</sup> Religious instruction, considered indispensable, inducted the young female into the family's church. Basic schooling occurred at home, sometimes augmented through attendance at day or boarding school; domestic training and religious instruction also occurred at home. Accomplishments, too, could be acquired at home, though usually from governesses and private tutors, perhaps with 'finishing' at a day school or boarding school,<sup>7</sup> such as the one Cassandra and Jane Austen attended at Reading.

Governesses and tutors were freelance employees, governesses living in the family for a small salary and bed and board, tutors visiting and paid per lesson. Novelists from Rousseau on had depicted

tutors as romantically dangerous to their female pupils; Austen ignores that possibility. Novelists for the next century would depict governesses as romantically sympathetic;<sup>8</sup> Austen glanced down that road with Jane Fairfax, but she represents governesses as the subordinate creatures they were. Schools were businesses, and those for girls were often run by former governesses or women of some education with enough capital to start a business. Most schools were quite small, run as extended households, and often criticised as incompetent, unhygienic and morally corrupting. Whether good or bad, tutors, governesses and schools all had to meet parents' demands in order to get paid, and for over a century before Austen and for half a century after her, most parents demanded 'accomplishments' for their daughters.

'Accomplishments' included several elements. Dancing, singing and playing music displayed the young woman's body and bearing at social occasions to attract a suitor.<sup>9</sup> Drawing, painting, fashionable modern languages (especially French and Italian) and decorative needlework demonstrated taste and 'polite' knowledge as markers of cultural distinction, as did the social arts of conversation and letter-writing, with accompanying knowledge of the 'belles-lettres'. These comprised approved essays, drama, poetry, travelogues (the most widely read form of book after novels), perhaps the 'better sort' of prose fiction and 'elegant' learning, especially historiography (often recommended as an antidote for dangerous novel reading, which may explain Austen's antipathy to it). Similarly desirable and useful was knowledge of 'books of the day', or important and widely read contemporary publications. This fashion impelled what commentators called the 'rise of the reading public' and dated from the mid eighteenth century. Belles-lettres and books of the day constituted a common literary culture for both men and women of the upper and middle classes. The Austen family participated in this culture, as do Austen's characters, and her novels allude to belles-lettres and books of the day just as they are designed to take their place among them.

'Accomplishments' enabled marriageable and married women to display the cultural distinction that demonstrated social distinction and advanced upper- and middle-class family interests. Accordingly, 'accomplishments' were preferred to two main alternatives. A woman lacking 'accomplishments' might be merely 'notable' – the

period's term for a woman who knew little more than domestic economy and was consequently incapable of cultivated socialising, though some commentators asserted the 'notable' woman's usefulness to her family, especially in uncertain times. If being 'accomplished' was set against being 'notable', both were set against being 'learned', or a 'bluestocking', supposed to unfit a woman for the marriage market, genteel society and even 'notability'. 'Learning' was accordingly condemned by female conduct books, satirised by male and female writers and excluded from most females' education. 'Learning' meant knowledge proper to male education and restricted to male participation, and included classical and Biblical languages, analytical and scientific discourses, controversial writing, theology and mathematics. The Austen sisters were not 'learned' in this sense, though they were both 'accomplished' and 'notable'.

By their day 'accomplishments', too, were increasingly criticised. This was less for subordinating women to men and family interests and more for failing to provide women with the sovereign subjectivity and intellectual resources thought necessary for their roles in family, society and nation, for independence when unmarried or widowed and for their individual spiritual salvation. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued that educating women to be 'accomplished' or 'notable' denied them the intellectual independence and moral self-discipline conferred by a professional education, thus leaving them an obstacle to social progress and reform. Jane Austen would more likely agree with Wollstonecraft's further argument that 'accomplishments' left women dependent on men's judgement and authority, consequently incapable of using God-given reason to guide desire to good rather than evil and therefore barred from spiritual salvation. In the national and imperial crisis of the day a more frequent criticism, voiced forcefully by Hannah More in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), was that education in mere 'accomplishments' disabled women for their role as moral, cultural and social reformers within the home and local society and thus in the great national patriotic struggle then underway.

Like many contemporaries, including Wollstonecraft and More, Austen used the novel to illustrate these concerns; unlike them, she eschews overt didacticism and develops the theme of female education through novelistic form, especially character and plot.<sup>10</sup>

In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Bennet and Mr Bingley marry women of beauty, but whereas Mrs Bennet was only beautiful and 'notable' and thus unable to govern her houseful of daughters or impress the right kind of suitors, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet have a good education thanks to their father and their relatives the Gardiners (apt name for cultivators) and both achieve proper marriages. Jane Austen does present under-, ill-, or mis-educated heroines, in Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood, but there are more poorly or wrongly educated minor female characters, such as the comically pedantic Mary Bennet and her dangerously superficial sister Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* and the sympathetic but ignorant Harriet Smith in *Emma*. In each case, character is attributed to education, affecting the individual's, family's and even nation's destiny.

There are two further and more important differences between Austen's and her contemporaries' treatment of female education. She and they correlate education with moral and intellectual character, but, as Jane Austen told her niece Fanny Knight, 'pictures of perfection' – presumably properly educated – 'make me sick & wicked' (L, 23–25 March 1817) and she also excludes from her novels the 'improperly' educated and consequently 'fallen' women found in many other novels. In Austen's novels, neither 'good' nor 'bad' education guarantees anything; both the well educated Elizabeth Bennet and her badly educated sister Lydia are fallible, though in different ways; the properly educated Fanny Price is tempted by the viciously educated Henry Crawford, the viciously educated Mary Crawford loves the virtuously educated Edmund Bertram and despite his education he is attracted to Mary rather than Fanny for most of the novel. Moreover, very few of Austen's badly educated females – Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park* is a rare exception – end in the 'ruin' that would be their fate with many another novelist. Austen does distribute novelistic justice according to a character's education, but all are fallible despite education.

Austen's avoidance of overt didacticism and extremes in her novelistic treatment of education may owe less to conscious artistry than to her religious education. Anglican theology held that human sinfulness could only be redeemed by free will exercised for good and sanctioned by divine grace. Like contemporaries from Wollstonecraft to More, Austen believed that an educated mind

was necessary for this task. As a Christian and Anglican, however, Austen rejected more reformist contemporaries' view that education or 'Enlightenment' could eventually create a humanly made paradise on earth; equally she rejects the common conduct-book doctrine that education would at best help women endure the inevitable miseries of female life and at worst inspire unachievable and thus afflicting aspirations.

Finally, Jane Austen similarly aims to educate her readers, again indirectly, through novel form. Her use of the recently developed narrative technique of free indirect discourse, or reported inward speech and thought, encourages readers to sympathise, identify and agree with the heroine; when Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse realises her error in reading her world, readers are forced to recognise theirs in reading her: all are fallible, all in need of continuing education, all awaiting grace, divine or humane. This technique makes Austen's novels, unlike most of their contemporaries, different on rereading, and a rereadable book is, if only by cultural convention, a 'classic', or canonical literature – a public institution of continuing education in which Austen's novels, as this Cambridge edition indicates, are firmly installed.

## NOTES

1. D. D. Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), p. 1.
2. Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), part 4.
3. See Barbara Horwitz, 'Women's Education During the Regency: Jane Austen's Quiet Rebellion', *Persuasions* 16 (1994), 135–46.
4. See Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 4.
5. Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change, and Society in England, 1780–1870*, new edition (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 62.
6. See Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), ch. 4.
7. See Christopher Martin, *A Short History of English Schools 1750–1965* (Hove: Wayland Publishers, 1979), pp. 37–41.

8. See Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes, *The Governess: An Anthology* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997) and Katharine West, *Chapter of Governesses: A Study of the Governess in English Fiction 1800–1949* (London: Cohen and West, 1949).
9. June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education in England* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 64.
10. See Jane Nardin, 'Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education', *Persuasions* 20 (1998), 15–20.