



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

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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gravestone in Winchester Cathedral: 'Their grief is in proportion to their affection, they know their loss to be irreparable, but in their deepest affliction they are consoled by a firm though humble hope that her charity, devotion, faith and purity have rendered her soul acceptable in the sight of her REDEEMER.'⁹

NOTES

1. See Stephen Prickett, 'The Religious Context', in *The Context of English Literature: The Romantics*, ed. Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 116.
2. William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), p. 24.
3. *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*, second edition (1717), vol. I, p. 326. Subsequent references are included in the text.
4. William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity, in Three Parts*, twelfth edition, 2 vols. (1807), vol. II, p. 376.
5. Thomas Herring, *Seven Sermons on Public Occasions* (1763), p. 105.
6. See David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen*, reprinted with additions (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1997), p. 445.
7. [William Vickers], *A Companion to the Altar: Shewing the Nature & Necessity of a Sacramental Preparation in Order to our Worthy Receiving the Holy Communion* (1793?), p. vi. Subsequent references are included in the text.
8. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), vol. I, p. 189. See Section II, 'From the Sermons of the Right Revd Thomas Sherlock, D. D. Lord Bishop of London', in *Family Lectures; or, Domestic Divinity, being a Copious Collection of Sermons*, 2 vols. (1791-5), vol. I, pp. 266-99.
9. See Michael Wheeler, *Jane Austen and Winchester Cathedral* (Winchester: Winchester Cathedral, 2003), p. 2.

Trade

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On first sight it might seem that Austen's novels display the same lack of interest in trade and slavery as they do in issues of contemporary politics, whether they be the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars. Yet the social worlds of Austen's novels evince a profound concern with trade, for almost every character is defined and determined by his or her relationship to, and distance from, commerce. To her age, 'trade' meant not only the buying and selling of goods and services, but also a set of ideas marshalled in defence of commerce and business. As such, the term 'trade' further invoked a complex set of cultural assumptions about tradesmen, merchants and the moral status of commerce.

Jane Austen wrote, and was published, in a period of profound economic transition in Great Britain, characterised by revolutions agricultural and industrial. In 1815, Britain was the wealthiest country in Europe, and its economy was the most developed. Britain was the first country to experience the transformation of its economy and society from a predominantly rural and agricultural mode to a more urban and industrialised configuration. This change was accompanied by a significant increase in population, and unprecedented annual rates of economic growth of between 2 and 3 per cent between 1790 and 1820. The wealthy elite that Austen depicted in her novels lived in county towns and rural villages, in a world of privilege and prosperity that insulated itself from these transformations. Yet the wealth of this elite was derived from, and contributed to, this transforming and industrialising economy.

Despite the important economic transformations of her age, scenes of commerce and industry are largely absent from Austen's novels. Unlike her Victorian successors, her novels do not depict factories belching smoke, and her characters express no enthusiasm for innovative industrial wonders, such as cotton mills, coal-mines

and canals. Instead, Austen's novels depict a society at leisure: characters are occupied in taking tea, socialising and practising philanthropy, but they are not shown performing – and indeed do not have – the tasks and duties of any occupation, profession or trade. The novels depict a narrow echelon of society that is, by and large, without a work ethic, even though it believes in the moral importance of labour for the poor.

For the most part, characters in Austen express a profound distaste for trade. In an age deeply concerned with status and rank, to be associated with trade was categorically demeaning. Discussion about tradesmen and merchants was conducted as part of the historically enduring debate on the nature of the gentleman, and was frequently related to questions of rank. In the early eighteenth century, numerous Whiggish writers had proposed that the status of a gentleman was compatible with trade and commerce. Addison and Steele's *Spectator* essays (1710–12) discussed many examples in which mercantile and professional men acted with the virtue and propriety of gentlemen. Nonetheless, a consistent stream of conservative opinion throughout the eighteenth century continued to argue that active engagement in commerce vitiated any claims to gentility. Many poets and writers – including those that Austen identified as important to her – adopted this anti-commercial discourse in their writing. In *The Deserted Village* (1770), Oliver Goldsmith depicted destruction of the customary world of an idealised rural village in England, and laid the blame at the corrupting forces of modern commerce. In the poem, the 'unfeeling train' of trade, governed by values that perceived everything in terms of monetary value, dispossesses the happy villagers from the bucolic and sentimental village of Auburn. William Cowper – Marianne Dashwood's favourite poet (*SSS*, 1:3) – argued that in its modern form, commerce had grown cruel and corrupting in its search for profit at all cost. In *The Task* (1785) Cowper railed against merchants, who

disclaiming all regard
For mercy and the common rights of man,
Build factories with blood, conducting trade
At the sword's point, and dyeing the white robe
Of innocent commercial justice red.¹

In the calculating spirit of trade, Jane Austen read, the enduring virtues of the English gentlemen were narrowed, hardened and corrupted.

To the critics of commercial spirit, trade was inimical to a gentleman's virtue, which was established by his financial autonomy, and made manifest in his real property, primarily land. Each of Austen's wealthiest gentlemen is identified by and through his estate. In the case of Darcy and Pemberley or Knightley and Donwell Abbey or Rushworth and Sotherton, the estate is a synecdoche for a gentleman's virtue, and hence an advertisement of his marital eligibility. Possession of such an estate is a guarantee of a gentleman's 'independence', a key term Austen uses to describe the economic agency afforded to gentlemen by their wealth. By contrast, critics argued, a merchant, even if prosperous, lacked this essential independence. A tradesman or merchant continually relied on others, having established bonds of trust and dependence through contracts and systems of credit. A merchant did not rely on his independent wealth, like a gentleman, but on his credit. According to contemporary economic analysis, a merchant's capital was constantly circulating, as he (or rarely she) invested in raw materials, put out the work to artisans and sold the resulting product. To critics, these circles of economic dependence led also to an ethical dependence on others, and compromised the merchant's ability to act like a gentleman.

The distinction between trade and gentlemanly independence was often articulated geographically. Trade was routinely depicted as urban, existing in towns and cities, in sharp contrast to the supposedly bucolic concerns of the rural estates. Within the great metropolis of London, much distinction was made of the distance between the polite West End of the city and the more mercantile districts around the City. Almost the only overlap between these distinct zones is the shop. Though the scenes of industry and commerce are never seen in Austen's novels, her characters are concerned with shopping and conspicuous consumption. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the younger Bennet daughters take much interest in the milliner's shop and the circulating library in Meryton, but these commercial premises are generally a cover for flirtation. Shopping expeditions are not made to purchase anything for the subsistence of the family. Rather, women make shopping trips in order to

demonstrate that their labour – in needlepoint or finishing bonnets – is entirely devoted to non-productive work, and their interests are precisely not in trade.

Austen herself had some knowledge of urban commerce – and perhaps the social stigma it aroused – through her experience of the banking business of her brother, Henry Austen. After establishing his bank and army agency (which made and received payments for the families of military officers employed on active duty) in 1801, Henry lived in London in the high style expected of a banker. Jane Austen visited his house in Henrietta Street on numerous occasions: in 1813 she remarked that the family were visited by one of the bank's partners from the 'Compting house' down stairs (L, 16 September 1813). In 1815, however, as the wartime economy began to wind down, the banking business experienced difficulties. The Alton branch failed at the end of 1815, and by 15 March 1816 the other branches, the London bank and the army agency were all insolvent, and Henry was declared bankrupt. His extended family lost the considerable sums they had secured as sureties for the bank (totalling over £30,000): even Jane Austen lost her savings of £26, including the profits of *Mansfield Park*.² These events would have reinforced for her the ineluctable connection between prosperity and propriety in her society, underlining the double-edged lesson that position in society was established by birth and status, but was maintained by wealth.

Austen was probably familiar with the works of Adam Smith, the most distinguished writer on economics in the late eighteenth century: allusions to his writings have been detected in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example.³ In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith wrote the definitive account of a 'commercial' capitalist economy. In his argument, all men were in some respects merchants: the originary division of labour meant that 'every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant'. Nonetheless, Smith divided 'civilised society' into 'three great, original and constituent orders': 'to those who live by rent, to those who live by wages, and to those who live by profit', and suggested that only the first two – the landed elite and the industrious labourers – had the interests of general society in mind. In Smith's argument, merchants did not have the same 'connection with the interest of the society', for their 'thoughts' were 'commonly exercised rather about

the interest of their own particular branch of business, than about that of the society'. Merchants, although they were the loudest in voicing complaints about economic policy, Smith said, were in fact only protecting their 'particular branch of trade or manufactures'.⁴ Actuated by self-interest, merchants' policy tended towards the restriction of competition and the advance of monopoly. Although Adam Smith is now most widely known as an apologist for capitalism, his argument here is informed by the same kind of anti-mercantile discourse as Austen's.

To contemporaries – especially from the point of view of the gentry – the stigma attached to trade meant that no one could remain active in trade and be fully acceptable in gentry society. Much of the social drama of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, plays out the complex consequences of this shame about trade and the origins of wealth. In notorious scenes with Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet has to fight to establish her credentials as a gentleman's daughter, despite the contamination of her mother's background in a professional family. In the imaginary of the Austen novels, as elsewhere in eighteenth-century culture, the acquisition of landed property was the only permanent way to seal the retirement from commerce. Adam Smith took it for granted that 'merchants are commonly ambitious of becoming country gentlemen', even though he thought their economic status quite separate (*Wealth of Nations*, I, 3, iv, 3, p. 411). Historians have debated the extent to which this cultural commonplace was true, without coming to much agreement. One historian estimates that about 11 per cent of the owners of country houses in the period 1760–1819 had purchased them with new money gained from the world of business.⁵

Even so, it was certainly widely believed in the early nineteenth century that a tradesman in possession of a secure fortune must be in want of a country estate. Sir William Lucas serves as an example: having made a tolerable fortune in trade in Meryton, Lucas had been knighted during his service as mayor of the town. Emboldened by the higher status implied by the knighthood, Lucas had developed 'a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town' and so had removed to a more rural residence which he grandiosely renamed Lucas Lodge. While Sir William's title and wealth give him a certain claim to gentry status, the novel

makes clear to readers that this claim is recent, and insecure. Lucas's trajectory undercuts that of Charles Bingley, who is less advanced along a parallel social progress. Bingley has inherited £100,000 from his father, a fortune that had been 'acquired by trade' in the north of England. With this money, Bingley intends to purchase 'a good house and the liberty of a manor', so as to establish himself as a gentleman with a landed estate (*P&P*, 1:4). Both Charles Bingley and Sir William Lucas remind us that all landed wealth has an origin, and that in a commercial society, trade is likely to figure prominently. Subsequently, both the Bingleys and Lucases express a constant and complex anxiety about their status, which manifests itself especially as disgust for their origins in trade.

Despite these stories of disgust and stigma attached to trade, historians have suggested that the activities and attitudes of the upper classes 'belie the simplistic idea of an implacable hostility between the industrial middle class and an indolent landed one'. Austen's period was one in which 'aristocratic involvement with the business of making money moved into a new gear'.⁶ This was evidenced by men like the Duke of Bridgewater, who gained much renown for his entrepreneurial spirit in developing canals and coal-mines on his estates near Manchester. Ambitious landowners like John Dashwood and George Knightley expected to grow their estates through prudent management and judicious improvement. Acquiring a country estate, as Bingley proposed, was in this sense more like a change in commercial activity from mercantile trading to capital investment. A merchant's heir like Bingley does not retire from his father's mercantile concerns by acquiring a landed estate, rather he refocusses his inherited wealth in new forms of commercial activity, the agricultural production of a landed estate. Many landowners established close links with urban trade and the new industries through their landed estates, by developing mining concerns on their land or investing in new transport developments. Similar strategies were followed by landowners who invested their wealth in joint stock companies, or who retained ownership of development land in expanding industrial regions. Others maintained significant interests in the colonies: in *Mansfield Park*, the Bertram family is maintained by a 'West Indian property', presumably a sugar plantation (*MP*, 1:1). One of the key ways in which the established landed elite were connected with the new money

of the mercantile elite was through marriage. Austen's novels, with their plots of marriage into superior status, have often suggested a kind of historical allegory of social aspiration.

Nonetheless, when considered in moral terms, the merchant and tradesman were understood in Austen's period to be motivated by self-interest. Nowhere was this more apparent, it seemed to contemporaries, than in the case of slavery and the slave trade. Over three million African slaves were carried on British vessels to the Americas in the eighteenth century, and at the end of this period, the slave population of the Caribbean sugar colonies stood at over half a million. The system of chattel slavery was regulated by severe legal codes, and relied on explicit racial discrimination. Despite the endemic violence of the sugar plantations, slavery was entirely legal in British colonies throughout Austen's life. Yet she would have been aware that the immense profits of this commerce were achieved at an enormous cost in terms of human misery. Although critics had long questioned the legality and morality of slavery, apologists argued that the profits legitimated the business. Both the trade in slaves between Africa and the Americas and the slave labour plantations in the American colonies, were the two most profitable enterprises known to British commerce in the eighteenth century. Historians continue to debate the size of the trade and the extent of its profits, but to contemporaries it was clearly enormous. In 1803, the Prime Minister, William Pitt, argued that the combined trade in sugar and slaves produced a quarter of the profits of all overseas English trade. Although economic historians have been unable to agree on the exact contribution of profits from the slave plantations, the expansion of colonial trade was fundamental to British economic development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Opponents of slavery in England successfully prosecuted a test case abolishing the state of slavery in 1772, although the ruling did not extend to the American colonies. On 22 June of that year, the officiating judge of the Somerset case, Lord Mansfield, somewhat reluctantly declared that 'No master was ever allowed here to take a slave by force to be sold abroad because he deserted from his service.'⁷ By the late 1780s, the campaign for the abolition of the trade in slaves (but not the state of slavery itself) had gained considerable support in England, both in public and in Parliament.

Abolitionists were drawn from many circles, including a powerful group of conservative Evangelical Anglicans, including William Wilberforce and Hannah More. Outraged as much by the trade's endemic violence as its ethics, such men and women made British involvement in slavery a sentimental, moral and religious scandal. Jane Austen, like many conservative Evangelical moralists, identified closely with the Abolition Society, which finally succeeded in having a bill for the abolition of the slave trade pass through Parliament in 1807. She was not above making a joke of it, however: in *Emma*, Austen alludes to the abolition debate when joking that a governess placement agency was like an office 'for the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect' (*E*, 2:17). Nonetheless, her letters make clear that she had read, with considerable approval, Thomas Clarkson's (1760–1846) pious *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, which appeared in 1808.

It is in *Mansfield Park* that Austen ventured her most suggestive engagement with the debate on slavery and the morality of commerce. In recent decades the Antigua episode has become one of the more celebrated critical debates on Austen. The case was first articulated by Avrom Fleishman in 1967, and made better known by Warren Roberts and Edward Said in later decades. The felicity of the Bertrams at Mansfield Park is disturbed when the family find themselves, most unexpectedly, in financial difficulties. The underlying cause, Sir Thomas admits, is 'some recent losses on his West India Estate, in addition to his eldest son's extravagance' (*MP*, 1:3). A sugar plantation was expected to be an extremely profitable business: J. R. Ward estimates that sugar plantations regularly made returns as high as 15 per cent a year (a rate at which estate owners doubled their investment every five years).⁸ But after unspecified recent events the Bertrams' 'Antigua estate is to make such poor returns' as to make the family 'rather straitened' (*MP*, 1:3). Sir Thomas travels to Antigua to address the unstated problem with the estate. Many readers have assumed their estate was a sugar plantation: on his return, Fanny asks him about 'about the slave trade' (*MP*, 2:3). Fleishman, and after him Roberts and Said, suggest that the estate's problems stem from a political and economic crisis in the sugar colonies caused by the Abolition Bill, although there is little historical evidence for this.

Most readings of the problems in Antigua have centred on the economic dimension, especially the connection between slavery and the Bertrams' English prosperity. To Austen this problem was also a philosophical and ethical one. The abolitionists' debate on the slave trade engendered profound unease in Britain about the morality of commerce. It was clear to all that slavery was incompatible with British notions of freedom (encapsulated in the doctrine of habeas corpus): the Mansfield decision had shown that this principle extended to Africans and ex-slaves. The Abolition Bill proposed that these British principles of liberty must be extended across the Atlantic. In his 1808 history, Thomas Clarkson advertised that the abolition debate was about ethics not economics, arguing that slave-owning was evidence of moral failing. The origin of slavery, Clarkson proposed, lay in the self-interest of the commercial spirit. 'The evil [of slavery] began in avarice. It was nursed also by worldly interest.' Of the slave traders and the slave-owning planters, he asks, 'Can their feelings be otherwise than corrupted, who consider their fellow-creatures as brutes, or treat those as cattle, who may become the temples of the Holy Spirit?'⁹ Sir Thomas Bertram's journey to Antigua broadcasts his status as a slave-holder, a morally reprehensible status which is increasingly incompatible with being a British gentleman. For Clarkson, and for Jane Austen, the question of slavery was a question of the morality of trade. Her concern is not for the political liberties of the slave (of whom she took no notice), but the corrupted morality of the English planters and slave-traders. The slave trade was not simply a commercial enterprise, it was the clearest expression of the essentially selfish nature of the commercial imperative.

NOTES

1. *The Poems of William Cowper. Volume II: 1782–1785*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), IV, lines 678–83.
2. *Reminiscences of Caroline Austen*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Guildford: The Jane Austen Society, 1986), pp. 47–8.
3. Kenneth Moler, 'Literary Allusion in *Pride and Prejudice*', in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice'*, ed. Marcia McClintock Folsom (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993), pp. 89–93.

4. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), I, iv, 1 (p. 37); I, xi, 7 (p. 265). Subsequent references are included in the text.
5. Lawrence Stone and Jean C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), table 6.2.
6. F. M. L. Thompson, *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture, Britain 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 27–8.
7. Quoted in Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitations of Slavery* (1776), appendix 8, pp. 67–9.
8. J. R. Ward, 'The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650–1834,' *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 31 (1978), 197–213.
9. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808), pp. 19–24.