



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

# JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

preoccupation of fiction that Jane Austen began by repudiating. Here is a novel of 'feelings' that are properly retentive.

NOTES

1. The most widely available edition containing this preface is the Everyman edition (London: J. M. Dent, 1962), see pp. xiii-xiv.
2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 316.
3. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 143.
4. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 23.
5. *The Watchman*, no. 4 (25 March 1799).

Rank

THOMAS KEYMER

Mr Elliot's bland assertion that 'rank is rank' (*P*, 2:4) makes plain the gulf between Jane Austen's characters and first audience, for whom rank is an intricate but self-evident system of social organisation and signification, and modern readers, for whom the nuances and gradations of the system are often obscure. Social position is of consuming importance in the novels, with individuals and families measuring their relative standings to the finest degree while devising long-term strategies for advancement in status. Yet these concerns are articulated in terms predating the class-based language of politics that grew up among radicals such as Paine, Spence and Thelwall in the 1790s, became consolidated in the work of social theorists such as Robert Owen and David Ricardo in the 1810s and 1820s, and continues to shape modern assumptions. The term 'class' was already current by Austen's day – P. J. Corfield cites a writer of 1753 who itemised English society in 'five Classes; viz. the Nobility, the Gentry, the genteel Trades (all those particularly which require large Capital), the common Trades, and the Peasantry'<sup>1</sup> – but as an organising concept it was yet to diverge significantly from traditional specifications of rank, station or degree. 'Rank' remained the established model, and dictated conventional thought. Where 'class' would be measured in terms above all of productivity and income, locating individuals in socio-economic positions attained through material success, 'rank' placed primary emphasis on lineage, implying that social status was more or less inalienably conferred by birth and descent. Where 'class' brings with it overtones of structural antagonism and conflict, moreover, 'rank' suggested stratifications that were harmonious, orderly and stable – ranks being nothing if not serried. For Samuel Johnson, who teased the genteel republican Catherine Macaulay by inviting her servant to dinner ('She has never liked me since'), social hierarchy was guaranteed by ties of interdependence and mutual

advantage, and consisted of 'fixed, invariable external rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, as they are allowed to be accidental' (i.e. given).<sup>2</sup>

As exponents of a genre specialising in close and particular renderings of social reality, few novelists of Austen's day fail to register the defining importance of rank. Yet it is hard to think of a contemporary or precursor in whose fiction there is quite so thorough an immersion in, and calibration of, the minutiae of the system. The eighteenth-century novelist most admired by Jane Austen, Samuel Richardson, wrote innovatively about emerging fault-lines in the strata of rank, and in *Pamela* (1740) – in which a maid-servant wins her master's hand – he pioneered the plot of marital elevation that Austen was to use herself in more muted form. The self-made Richardson had no secure grasp of titles, conditions and modes of address in the gentry world, however, and in his novels frequent solecisms result from what he ruefully called 'my Ignorance of Propriety of those Kinds'.<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, by contrast, was native to this world, and writes with unfailing alertness to its codes and conventions. The premium she placed on accuracy is seen in her corrections to niceties of etiquette in a manuscript novel by her niece Anna, who had improperly shown a surgeon being introduced to a peer while also botching the form of introduction used for the peer's brother. Austen also protests, of her niece's fictional nomenclature, that 'There is no such Title as Desborough – either among the Dukes, Marquisses, Earls, Viscounts or Barons' (*L*, 10 August 1814).

Though relatively disadvantaged in financial terms, Jane Austen's family could boast aristocratic descent and ongoing connections, and if anything the lack of corresponding wealth enhanced the obsession with rank in her immediate circle. The family treasured a surviving letter to Jane's great-grandmother Mary Brydges, sister to the first Duke of Chandos, as a mark of inherited distinction, and also found in the letter (from Mary's mother, a rich merchant's daughter) consoling evidence that 'then, as now . . . rank had the power of attracting and absorbing wealth'.<sup>4</sup> In Austen's lifetime, rank and wealth were successfully reunited in the person of her brother Edward, who was adopted as an heir by childless cousins, the Knights of Godmersham, and thereby came into an estate of the opulence of Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*. Decades

later, Edward's appalling daughter, Lady Knatchbull, wrote that Jane Austen would have been 'very much below par as to good Society & its ways' without the refinements acquired on her frequent visits to Godmersham.<sup>5</sup> The visits certainly afforded Jane Austen a perspective on elite life at variance with her usual viewpoint, which was that of a household similar in circumstance – a clergyman's widow with unmarried daughters subsisting in genteel poverty on £450 a year – to the Dashwoods of *Sense and Sensibility*, for whom an annual income of £500 makes maintenance of proper appearances a constant struggle. Both these perspectives inform the novels, sometimes within a single sentence.

The dedication of *Emma* to the Prince Regent takes Austen's fiction to the very apex of the social pyramid, but otherwise the highest echelons of the nobility are thinly represented. Unlike the 'silver fork' novelists who dominated the fiction market of the 1820s with their voyeuristic depictions of high society, Austen's attitude to aristocratic manners is one of general neglect, punctuated by occasional disdain. Among the nobility, the established order of precedence was as she lists it to Anna, with baron the lowest degree of the peerage, but where such ranks are specified it is typically as remote objects of social ambition. Thus General Tilney is disappointed to miss the Marquis of Longtown in Bath (*NA*, 2:2), where the Elliots anxiously cultivate the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple (*P*, 2:4). Setting aside juvenile skits such as 'Jack and Alice', in which an ambitious girl lures a senescent peer into 'raising her to the rank of a Dutchess' (ch. 9), the character of highest rank to appear onstage in Austen is probably Lord Osborne in *The Watsons*, a stuffed shirt who does little to substantiate Mrs Edwards's confidence that 'Great People have always their charm'. Austen thus ignores a group that continued to hold the reins of political power – peers and their sons formed a majority in every government cabinet between 1783 and 1835<sup>6</sup> – and also the informal strings of patronage, connection and dependency that bound together the social hierarchy. Even so, aristocracy retains a teasing subliminal presence in Austen's cast. As though to inscribe the concealed noble inheritance of her mother's line, she eschews the pseudo-Norman nomenclature conventional in fiction of the day (Belmonts, Duvals, Orvilles and the like) and plays on the names of actual dynasties, extinct and surviving. D. J. Greene notes the family connection

to Thomas Willoughby, first Lord Middleton, in Jane Austen's maternal line, and points to the great estate of Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire, where the pedigree of the incumbent family also involved Watsons, Fitzwilliams and D'Arcys.<sup>7</sup>

Beneath a peerage of three hundred or so families in England there ranged the graduated demographic on which Austen concentrates her gaze: a gentry society comprising the families of approximately (in 1803) 540 baronets, 350 knights, 6,000 landed squires and 20,000 gentlemen, amounting in total to about 1.4 per cent of the national population and enjoying 15.7 per cent of the national income (Perkin, *Modern English Society*, pp. 18–22). It is to this rurally based society, centred on major landowning families and descending in fine gradations through non-landed professionals and moneyed rentiers of varying status, that Austen's characters refer when they speak of the 'neighbourhood'. In each novel, 'neighbourhood' is a feature of both the landscape and its elite population. It denotes both the hierarchy of estates and manors that revolved around the local great house, and the rural gentry who inhabited these places, where they competed for visits from, and invitations to, houses on the level above, and made seasonal forays to London or Bath in pursuit of extended connection. Though rich in rivalries and tensions, this is a hierarchy still defined and united by vertical ties of influence and dependency down to its lowest reaches, and not yet acrimoniously fragmented – as in 'condition of England' novels of the 1840s – by horizontal solidarities of class. The cities might be another story (witness Peterloo in 1819), but as late as 1824 a representative essayist could still exult that the dangerous chasm between noble and labouring classes in other nations did not exist in England: 'with us the space between the ploughman and the peer is crammed with circle after circle, fitted in the most admirable manner for sitting upon each other, for connecting the former with the latter, and for rendering the whole perfect in cohesion, strength and beauty'.<sup>8</sup>

At the peak of this gentry society are the baronets, the lowest hereditary titled order, whom Austen represents with uneven levels of distinction in Sir Thomas Bertram, Sir John Middleton and *Sanditon's* Sir Edward Denham. Then there is Sir Walter Elliot, whose sense of his own distinction is reinforced by regular perusal of

Debrett's *Baronetage of England* (1808) – an authoritative dictionary of pedigree that Austen implicitly contrasts in *Persuasion* with the meritocratic *Navy List*. No fewer than 233 new baronetcies had been created between 1760 and 1800 (thereby creating the need for Debrett),<sup>9</sup> but most were conferred on men of established family, so that Sir Walter's own title, which dates back to the Restoration, need not be thought devalued. Next in order of precedence come the knights, whose titles differ crucially in not being heritable, so that a knighthood conveys no guarantee of ancestry: witness Sir William Lucas, who 'had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune, and risen to the honour of a knighthood' (*P&P*, 1:5). Baronet and knight may be all the same to the servant in *Persuasion* who speaks of 'a baronight' (*P*, 1:12) – an eloquent malapropism that Austen may have taken from Burney's *Camilla* – but not to the socially conscious Lady Russell, whose respect for benighted Sir Walter is rooted in precedence. As Austen puts it, 'Herself, the widow of only a knight, she gave the dignity of a baronet all its due' (*P*, 1:2).

The form of Lady Russell's own title identifies it as deriving from the knighthood of her husband. Women of higher rank incorporate their Christian names in a form that distinguishes Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Lady Anne Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, as titled in their own right. Regardless of their marital status or the rank (if lower) of their husbands, daughters of peers invariably used this form, which marks out both Lady Catherine, the wife of a knight, and Lady Anne, the wife of a commoner, as noble by birth (in this case, as daughters of an earl). Courtesy titles like this would survive even in spectacular cases of downward mobility, as when a member of the Watson-Wentworth dynasty, whose father was a marquis, took on the oddly conflicted name of Lady Henrietta Alicia Sturgeon on marrying her footman in 1764.

Scarcely lower in standing were the greatest of the landowning commoners, who had not been touched by – or in some cases had eschewed – the titles of their ostensible superiors. With an estate worth more, at £10,000 a year, than that of many nobles, Mr Darcy represents an important category of rural gentry in Austen's England: men of wealth and lineage for whom plain 'Mr' was a badge of honour. A conspicuous instance is the

great commoner Thomas William Coke, of Holkham in Norfolk, who inherited estates worth £12,000 in 1776 and improved their yield threefold by 1816, yet during this period twice refused ennoblement – a gesture that made even a marquis congratulate him on ‘such independence, portraying a dignity of mind above all heraldry’.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the note of regret with which Lady Catherine de Bourgh describes Darcy’s paternal line as ‘respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled’ (*P&P*, 3:14) signals her distance from the Tory values often attributed to Jane Austen herself, according to which Darcy’s untitled state might even be his highest distinction. Simple esquireship connotes an incorruptible aloofness from the processes of political ingratiation and meretricious reward that had characterised the Whig hegemony of the previous century – a ‘peer-making age’ (as one minor novelist put it) during which the House of Lords grew in size from 153 in 1688 to 224 in 1780, despite the natural extinction of titles over the same period.<sup>11</sup> After 1780, the younger Pitt’s efforts to break the power of the Whig magnates led to increased rates of ennoblement, and brought into being a new body of parvenu peers who diluted the old equation between aristocratic rank and blue blood. Jane Austen’s egregious kinsman Sir Egerton Brydges (Bart.) was among many traditionalists affronted, in this process, by Pitt’s ‘palpable preference of mercantile wealth, and by his inborn hatred of the old aristocracy’.<sup>12</sup>

Beneath a character such as Darcy, who holds his own in noble company and impresses inferiors ‘as one of the most illustrious personages in this land’ (*P&P*, 3:15), there stretches a long and finely graded continuum of genteel rank that was widely seen as ensuring social stability and cohesion. Though keenly hierarchical, and supervised with the almost military sense of regimentation expressed when Mrs Norris deplores ‘the nonsense and folly of people’s *stepping out of their rank*’ (*MP*, 2:5, my emphasis), this continuum could still achieve a surprising inclusiveness of reach. Mr Knightley, with his splendid estate and handsome income, can be on visiting terms with Miss Bates, who scrimps and saves in upstairs lodgings; the obsequious Mr Collins, with only some exaggeration, can ‘consider the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom’ (*P&P*, 1:18). Connectedness is far from constituting equality, however, and all the novels display the

tensions arising from the dual imperative of nurturing community while also preserving distinction.

It is in *Emma*, where Austen’s heroine is not the usual challenger of hierarchy but rather its staunchest upholder, that the fine calibrations of rank are most clearly seen. With its distinct yet interconnected ‘sets of people’ – the phrase recurs in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*, and in *Emma* accommodates ‘the chosen and the best’, the ‘second set’, and more (*E*, 1:3) – the society of Highbury links, while also compartmentalising, the whole spectrum of acceptable gentility. At its peak is Knightley, the established squire whose lands have been in his family since Tudor times; near its foot are the illegitimate but connected Harriet Smith and the shabby-genteel Jane Fairfax; hanging on for dear life is the impoverished Miss Bates, whose notice was an honour, but no longer. It is worth adding that the patrician Knightley is sure enough of his standing to extend this spectrum further, preferring the company of his steward and tenant farmer, William Larkins and Robert Martin, to that of his genteel neighbours. Tellingly, however, Emma recoils from these indecorous contacts, and has no time for Knightley’s unsettling idea, in Martin’s case, of locating ‘true gentility’ in practical merit as opposed to technical rank (*E*, 1:8). She will mingle with the well born and make charitable visits to the poor, but ‘the yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do’ (1:4). Throughout the novel, this anxious correctness of form identifies Emma’s elite status as discernibly less secure than her future husband’s. Where Knightleys have owned the landscape and lived from its yield since the Dissolution, the Woodhouses are relative newcomers to their ‘notch’ in the Donwell estate, and live primarily from investments. The same insecurity returns when the public dance proposed by Frank Churchill arouses Emma’s alarm, not so much at the temporary interpenetrations of rank involved in the dance itself, but rather at the ‘difficulty in every body’s returning into their proper place the next morning’ – as though correct performance of social roles is itself a larger dance, strictly regulated, and not to be disrupted by the smaller. Equally alarming is what this carnivalesque proposal discloses about Frank himself, whose ‘indifference to a confusion of rank, bordered too much on inelegance of mind’ (*E*, 2:6) – and whose own paternity is indelibly undistinguished, we remember, his mother’s great family notwithstanding.

In their relative lack of land and reliance on capital, the Woodhouses lie close to the broad category of moneyed, professional and rentier families – a category of non-landed affluence to which David Spring applies the term ‘pseudo-gentry’ – who deferred to, emulated and sought to enter the gentry proper. ‘They devoted their lives to acquiring the trappings of gentry status for themselves and especially their children’, as Spring describes the ambitions and practices of this group: ‘the schooling, the accent, the manners . . . the habit of command, the large house in its own grounds, servants, carriages and horses, appropriate husbands and wives, and, last but not least, appropriate income’.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Woodhouses are as anxious to distinguish themselves from aspirational pseudo-gentry such as the Eltons and Westons as these families are to rise above the plain vulgarity of the Coles – an *arriviste* family who, for all their wealth, have yet to acquire sufficient refinement to erase the stigma of ‘trade’. In the polite but unrelenting competition for positional advantage that results, each participant displays the one-way vision that Emma attributes to Mr Elton, whose aversions and aspirations in courtship show him ‘so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and . . . so blind to what rose above’ (*E*, 1:16). When Elton finally marries Bristol money, his new wife is in Emma’s eyes ‘a little upstart, vulgar being’ (2:14), but one who then expresses her own ‘horror of upstarts’ (2:18); and so the chain of upward ambition and downward condescension goes on. All subscribe to the hierarchy of rank in general while seeking to breach it in person. Social acceptance proves harder to achieve than material wealth, however, and is secured at best with the glacial pace of the Weston family, ‘which for the last two or three generations had been rising into gentility’ (1:2).

Yet personal mobility of status was becoming more achievable as Austen wrote, and other novels reflect the mechanisms involved. Though peopled by conservative matriarchs like Mrs Ferrars and Lady Catherine, who seek ‘to have the distinction of rank preserved’ (*P&P*, 2:6) and promote strict endogamy to this end, the novels deal in more than mere romance in their characteristic endings, where traditional dynastic alliances give way to modern love matches. Elizabeth is not a gentlewoman’s daughter, and has an uncle in trade, but marries into the highest squirearchy; Elinor sees off a potent combination of fortune and rank in ‘the Hon.

Miss Morton, only daughter of the late Lord Morton, with thirty thousand pounds’ (*SS&S*, 2:11). Other processes promoting the interpenetration of social layers arose from the Napoleonic Wars, which not only threw up new opportunities for trade and industry or for success in the profession of arms, but also conferred new prestige on leaders in either field. ‘Mushrooms are every day starting up from the dunghill of trade’, as Southey lamented in 1806, so ‘undermining the distinction of ranks in society’.<sup>14</sup> Though Sir William Lucas remains cowed by old aristocracy, the confidence of the Bingleys in ‘associating with people of rank’ provides a bolder instance of entry into elite circles from the platform of trade (*P&P*, 1:4). No less firmly grounded in contemporary reality is the social as well as material advancement of Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*. Jane Austen’s brother Francis was knighted for his naval service, and early readers will have recalled Nelson (a baron) when Sir Walter deplores being leapfrogged in rank by ‘Lord St. Ives, whose father we all know to have been a country curate’ (*P*, 1:3). For Harold Perkin, these processes of elevation and assimilation slowed the formation of a moneyed class at odds with the landed gentry, and harnessed local dynamism in the service of larger stability: ‘the result was a self-contained system of social movement which left the shape and structure of society precisely as before, a “stationary state” based on the restless movement of its constituent atoms’ (Perkin, *Modern English Society*, p. 62). Bourgeois revolution is not in prospect at Highbury, to be sure. If any threat exists, it lurks instead in the hidden ranks of the labouring – or, worse, non-labouring – poor, dis severed from gentry society by the decay of rural paternalism, and ominously ruffling its serene surface in the shape of gypsies and poultry thieves.

## NOTES

1. James Nelson, *An Essay on the Government of Children*, second edition (1756), pp. 365–6, quoted by P. J. Corfield, ‘Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *History* 72 (1987), 38.
2. Samuel Johnson, conversation of 22 July 1763, reported in *Boswell’s London Journal, 1762–1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), p. 320.

3. Samuel Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 5 October 1753, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 245.
4. *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 48.
5. *Fanny Knight's Diaries: Jane Austen Through Her Niece's Eyes*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Alton: Jane Austen Society, 2000), p. 39.
6. Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London: Routledge, 1969), p. 40. Subsequent references are included in the text.
7. D. J. Greene, 'Jane Austen and the Peerage', *PMLA* 68 (1953), 1018. In Wentworth's case in *P*, the coincidence prompts Sir Walter Elliot to wonder sourly 'how the names of many of our nobility become so common' (1:3).
8. David Robinson (as 'Y. Y. Y.'), 'The Church of England and the Dissenters', *Blackwood's* 16 (1824), 397, quoted in Perkin, *Modern English Society*, p. 22.
9. Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 516.
10. Lord Townshend to Coke, 17 February 1806, quoted by A. M. W. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends*, 2 vols. (1908), vol. II, p. 338.
11. Charles Jenner, *The Placid Man; or, Memoirs of Sir Charles Belville*, second edition (1773), vol. II, p. 177, quoted in Langford, *Public Life*, p. 513.
12. Egerton Brydges, *The Autobiography, Times, Opinions, and Contemporaries of Sir Egerton Brydges*, 2 vols. (1834), vol. I, p. 196.
13. David Spring, 'Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World: Literary Critics and Historians', in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), pp. 60–1.
14. Robert Southey, *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 37.