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Englishness in Jane Austen: Reception's First Step

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I want to begin by quoting from the opening sentence of Anthony Mandal's Introduction to the Jane Austen Reception volume:

> 'Jane Austen is undoubtedly one of the few anglophone writers whose quintessential 'Englishness' constitutes a vital element of her fiction and, consequently, her reader's experience.' (p.1).

What I would like to do this morning is to outline at least some of the bases upon which a discussion of Jane Austen's Englishness can be established. An awareness of at least some of these considerations must have been in the minds of her early readers and played at least some part in the shaping of her European reception.

And on this point, I think it's appropriate to quote Anthony Mandal once again — this is from the 'Conclusion' to his Introduction — that Jane Austen's Englishness is less of 'a barrier than a point of interest for European readers and scholars' (p.11).

In talking about Jane Austen's Englishness, it's important to have a brief definition of terms. Now I appreciate that throughout Europe, when people talk about England, the English, and Englishness, they are usually referring, loosely and generally, to the people and character of Great Britain or the United Kingdom at large. So I want to make it clear that I am going to copy Jane Austen in being narrow and specific, and that in talking about Jane Austen's Englishness I am speaking of a quality or characteristic which belongs solely to England and the English. Someone from another part of the United Kingdom — from Scotland, Wales or Ireland (by which I mean Northern Ireland) — would be deeply offended if you called them English or talked about their Englishness. The Scottish, the Irish and the Welsh, each retains a strong sense of their distinct national identities. Historically, this is as true to-day as it was in the time of Jane Austen.

Equally, within the British Isles, England itself held a strong and distinct sense of national identity. In Jane Austen's day, it stood as the imperial power with an immediate empire; this was composed of its neighbour-colonies, the so-called 'Celtic fringe', Scotland, Ireland and Wales. In part, the strength and coherence of English national identity was a consequence of the war with France, a conflict which lasted over twenty years, from 1793 to 1815, a period of high nationalism and patriotic feeling almost exactly coinciding with Jane Austen's years as a

novelist. But England's firm sense of itself, going back to Shakespeare and beyond, also rested on the fact that it was an island, set apart from the mainland of Europe. As far as the mainland Europeans were concerned, this was isolation, highly disadvantageous to English manners and culture. To quote from the Bibliothéque Universelle, of Geneva, in 1816:

> the English needed French good taste 'in order to soften the gloom of their character and manners, typical of an isolated country…' ('Coup-d'oeil sur la littérature anglaise', vol.1, November 1816, pp.1-16; reprinted and adapted in the version that appeared in Polish in the Warsaw Journal, vol.6, pp.289-308).

The English, on the other hand, made a virtue of necessity. Upon this geological circumstance of insularity was constructed the ideology of 'the island race', a deep-rooted English ethnicity. It was through this racial lens that the English were able to identify themselves as lovers of freedom, masters of the sea, and armed with an imperial mission of conquest and trade. Earlier in the eighteenth-century, these sentiments and ideas inspired such bellicose anthems as 'God Save the King' and 'Rule Britannia'; and in the 1790's came popular songs celebrating the security of this 'tight little island', this 'snug little island'. And on the religious front, Britain, that is to say its English core, claimed to be the champions of the Protestant faith, standing firm against France, the largest and most powerful of the Catholic nations.This compound of proud insularity, overseas dominance and religious strength was a heady mixture, and it found expression and immortality as far back as Shakespeare.

And Jane Austen was scrupulous in observing this particularity. Through and through, the novels are determinedly English. It's true that her very earliest writing, the juvenilia, is full of jokes about Scotland, Ireland and Wales, with invented Scottish and Irish names and ludicrous adventures throughout these different parts of the United Kingdom. But this travelling around the British Isles was a literary game of her childhood. She was mocking the extravagant journeys and distant locations of Gothic and sentimental fiction. As she tells us in Northanger Abbey, Ann Radcliffe's Gothic 'imitators' were transporting their heroines to 'the Alps and the Pyranees', to 'Italy, Switzerland, and the south of France' (II.10), just as contemporary novelists she admired, including Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Charlotte Smith, were happy to locate their stories across Europe and outwards to America. But Jane Austen took a different course. By the time she was seventeen or eighteen, when the childhood writing was over, the travelling stops: the novels are invariably set in England.

And Jane Austen's England is highly selective, an England restricted almost entirely to the Home Counties around London and to the south and the south-west. Her chosen territory was the country houses, villages and small towns of southern England. There is only one movement beyond these limits, Elizabeth Bennet's visit to the Peak district of Derbyshire, a tourist destination about 150 miles north of London. But we are told nothing of her journey, nothing of the industrial midlands around Birmingham that she would have passed through. The focal point is her destined home, Darcy's country house at Pemberley.

Occasionally, characters go abroad. You'll remember that in Mansfield Park Sir Thomas Bertram and his son travel to the island of Antigua in the West Indies. However their journey out is dismissed with one word of description, that it was 'a favourable voyage' (I.4). As for his for his stay on Antigua and his journey back, Jane Austen tells us that Sir Thomas 'was ready to give every information… and to answer every question of his two sons almost before it was put' (II.1). Beyond this, she has nothing to say. Sir Thomas's 'every information', and his answers to 'every question', we are left to supply for ourselves. So it is throughout Mansfield Park: the attachment of the narrative is strictly to England. The Naval exploits of the sailors in

Mansfield Park and Persuasion take them round the world, across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean and the North Seas; they travel to America, Gibraltar, Sicily, St Domingo, the Cape of Good Hope and the West and the East Indies. But these are merely names mentioned in the text, en route; the narrative and its narrators remain in England.

This same static nationality prevails amongst Jane Austen's characters. There are no foreigners, with their amusing ways and stumbling English. One representative only from the British Empire, the 'half Mulatto' Miss Lambe, presumably from the West Indies, mentioned, but not yet seen, in Sanditon. And quite differently from her contemporaries, and differently too from the tradition of English comedy, on stage and in fiction, Jane Austen has no comic characters from Scotland, Ireland or Wales, with their broad dialects and provincial manners.From outside England, all we have are the three Anglo-Irish: Mr Dixon, mentioned but unseen in Emma; and in Persuasion, Lady Dalrymple, and her daughter, the Honourable Miss Carteret. Other than the Dalrymple name, there is no evidence whatsoever of their Irish origin.

What we find, then, throughout the novels, is a singular attention to England and the English. These are terms rich in national and cultural significance, and Jane Austen presents them for our scrutiny: for example, in Northanger Abbey, in the scene where Henry Tilney shakes Catherine Morland out of her sinister Gothic imaginings about his father. His famous reprimand is delivered in national terms: 'Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians.' And Tilney continues, further reminding her of England's national institutions —'our education', 'our laws', our press, our open society — institutions which should compel her attachment to reality. But there comes a sting in the tail, a subversive note, since the very openness of this society itself carries a note of menace, a Gothic shadow, for according to Tilney, England is a country 'where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies…' (II.9). This leaves the reader to arrive at his own judgement. To what degree is Tilney's reprimand delivered in the tones of tender and affectionate mockery ? And is there a point at which the irony takes on a serious note ?

Rather than run through all six novels for further examples of Englishness, I merely want to draw attention to Emma, in which Englishness arises as one of the novel's themes and emerges most fully in the figure of George Knightley: in what he personifies of England, Englishness and English values; qualities which are reflected and localised in the landscape around Knightley's home, Donwell Abbey:

> a sweet view — sweet to the eye and the mind.
> English verdure, English culture, English comfort,
> seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive. (III.6)

This pastoral scene embodies a national landscape with a quietly patriotic undertone: not the 'oppressive' sun of other lands, nor the 'foreign artfulness' of 'garden design from…Versailles and Hampton Court' but a return to all nature seen as a garden, an 'ensemble' 'sweet' 'to the eye and' to 'the mind'. This was the 'natural', 'modern' or 'English' garden promoted in the eighteenth-century by Horace Walpole and Thomas Whately. (John Dixon Hunt, edd. Maggie Lane and David Selwyn, Jane Austen: A Celebration (2000), pp.44-46). Only a few pages later, Frank Churchill, the quasi-villain of the story,condemns himself out of his own mouth, in national terms, complaining to Emma, unpatriotically, that he is 'sick of England — and would leave it to-morrow, if I could' (III.6).

To draw to a conclusion: in the period following Jane Austen's death, it was, of course, Sir Walter Scott who took Europe by storm; Jane Austen was left in his shadow. In many countries, her Englishness, her novel of manners, as it was seen, carried little or no significance alongside the wide and stirring appeal of Scott's historical vision. Moreover, the legacy of the Napoleonic wars remained. As Peter Mortensen reminds us in his chapter on Denmark, countries such as his, which had suffered at the hands of the British Navy, were likely to be put off by Austen's sailor heroes and by the eulogising of England's 'verdure…culture' and 'comfort'. But this wartime legacy was short-lived. The larger question as to how, in the long term, Jane Austen's Englishness affected her reception in Europe 'remains an open one', as Anthony Mandal reminds us in his Introduction, and its not a question that I've attempted to answer this morning . (Mandal and Southam , p.1).

A valuable step in this direction is the Atlas of the European Novel by Franco Moretti (Verso, 1998). This deals with the interconnections between literature and geographical space and gives a good deal of discussion to Jane Austen and the novelists of her time, underlining the singularity of her tightly-drawn English terrain. Alongside Moretto, it's interesting to see that fifty years earlier Nabokov took basically the same approach in his lecture] on Mansfield Park. He put some emphasis on what he called 'the space element' (p.12), with two sketch-maps of England and plans of Mansfield Park and Sotherton as aids in visualising the scenario of the novel, the movement of the characters and the distances and relationship of places, all these contributing towards his aim of revealing what he described as the novel's 'mechanism' (p.381). (Lectures on Literature, [MP written 1950-51] ed.Fredson Bowers (1980).