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General Tilney's Hot-houses: Some recent Jane Austen studies and texts

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Over sixty years ago, in 1905, Henry James sounded a warning note about the state of Jane Austen affairs. The tide of appreciation, he wrote, had risen 'rather higher, I think, than the high-water mark, the highest of her intrinsic merit and interest'. If James could say that then, to what fine marine metaphor would he be carried today! In 1905 this flood-tide was mere commercialism, the promotion of the book trade, 'who have found their "dear", our dear, everybody's dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose'. Today he would have to take account too of the academics and the examiners of literature and their following hordes of students and examinees. The Austen bibliography is an ever-swelling stream, with an outpouring of critical studies and new editions and popular books for the unliterary public at large. Some of these works deserve the sting of Jamesian disfavour. A prime example is the pictorial volume compiled by Ivor Brown.¹ Remembering Jane Austen's own categorization of publishers as cheating 'rogues', we can fairly call this a piece of the purest publishing enterprise. According to this volume, the 'world' of Jane Austen is represented by such unlikely and unjaneite items as the first steam locomotive, Nelson's naval uniform, muskets and cannon and military head-gear of the Waterloo period, cavalry pistols, a model of a slaving ship, a stage coach of about 1820, a Rowlandson cock-fighting scene and a ward of the Middlesex hospital. Dr Craik's book² is less of a joke and contains a good deal of useful information about the period, if the reader has stamina enough to get through prose quite so shapeless and puddy. Dr Craik is reasonably sound on facts (although there is a gremlin misdating of Jane Austen's death on the second line of chapter one); indeed, the book is so very full of facts that it reads like a scrambled trove of historical notes, and the scant historical interpretation, when such is ventured, is suspect. What, for example, are we to make of the claim (on the first page of the first chapter) that the England of Jane Austen's day was still markedly 'coherent and stable', when the novels themselves provide such a penetrating commentary upon a complex and changing society, a society, as Jane Austen so strikingly reveals, whose coherence is illusory? The third of these three books, by Marghanita Laski,³ is something different altogether, an example of publishing enterprise that James would have blessed and we can welcome. Its handsome lay-out and fine illustrations are obviously designed for a popular market. But these immediate attractions should not distract from our recognition of Miss Laski's very considerable

¹ *Jane Austen and Her World*, Lutterworth Press, 1966, 16/-.

² W. A. Craik, *Jane Austen and Her Time*, Nelson, 1969, 42/-.

³ *Jane Austen and Her World*, Thames and Hudson, 1969, 35/-.

achievement in providing what is by far the best short biography of Jane Austen in existence. Based on the latest scholarship, it is nonetheless written with style and wit and treats its subject with sympathy and respect. There could be no higher tide of proper appreciation than this. The most voluminous modern tribute to Jane Austen is in recent editions of the novels themselves. In the mid-1960s, R. W. Chapman's monumental Oxford edition (long venerated as the last word in textual scholarship) was textually improved upon by Mary Lascelles.⁴ And now Oxford has added a further tribute in the Oxford English Novels series (OEN).⁵ These are substantially Chapman's texts, plus completely new material: Introductions and explanatory and textual notes. To add to the OEN we also have the Penguin English Library (PEL).⁶ Again, these are basically the Chapman texts, with new Introductions and notes. What progress here, remembering that half a century has passed since Chapman's original Oxford edition? Predictably, the textual improvement is slight. Chapman was a scrupulous scholar bibliographer of the old classical school; moreover, the texts of the early editions, and their variants, offer little of interest to anyone save a bibliographical maniac. One of the few significant points, for example, is whether we should retain the reference to Lady Middleton's 'shocked delicacy' in response to Mrs Jennings's whispered confidence to Elinor about Colonel Brandon's 'natural daughter' (in chapter 13 of the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*). In the second edition of 1813 the sentence referring to Lady Middleton's reaction is removed. Was this because the 'natural daughter' had been indelicately underlined? Was Jane Austen's sense of propriety stiffening (she was at work on *Mansfield Park* at the time)? Or was it the publisher's removal? The textual point here is worth investigation since it seems to involve questions of contemporary taste, or of artistic procedure. But there are few cruces as interesting as this. So the post-Chapman textual work has been largely a matter of tidying-up and correcting minor details. Presentation-wise, however, there are important differences between the Chapman and post-Chapman editions. Essentially, Chapman's edition is monumental. It is the scholar's library text, antiquarian in tone, with the pages in quasi-facsimile. The type, the ornaments and the layout imitate the original editions, down to the archaicism of catch-words at the end of each page (or were the Clarendon Press compositors still so wedded to the past?). The texts are prefaced by nothing more than a short Introductory Note establishing the conditions of the novels' original publication. This Note echoes the historical-antiquarian tone of the text itself, echoed yet again in the Dunciadian-Nabokofian apparatus of Notes, Appendices, Indexes and Addenda (averaging forty pages per novel). In his Preface to the edition, Chapman quotes, with approval, Johnson's observation 'that all works which describe manners, require notes in sixty or seventy years'; and to this Chapman added his own observation 'that many readers of Jane Austen are distrustful with anything short of complete enlightenment'. This is the spirit (if not, as it turns out, the letter) of his attempt to equip the Oxford edition with all the necessary notes and explanations, to which subsequent editors have paid their spoken or unspoken respects (notably in borrowing the wording or substance of Chapman's notes).

The main difference between Chapman's edition and the OEN is that the recent series is specifically designed for student use, with practical Introductions (part-historical, part-critical). Chapman's elaborate apparatus of Indexes of places, characters etc. is discarded and there remains a minimal range of his old explanatory notes, plus some of recent addition. The PEL is

⁴ In the Everyman Edition.

⁵ *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Lucas, 1970, 45/-; *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Frank Bradbrook, 1970, 35/-; *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Claire Lamont, 1970, 35/-.

⁶ *Emma*, ed. Ronald Blythe, 1966, 6/-; *Mansfield Park*, ed. Tony Tanner, 1966, 6/-; *Persuasion*, ed. D. W. Harding, 1965, 5/-; *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Tony Tanner, 1969, 6/-.

similarly functional. Its main feature is the volume-Introduction, critically far more ambitious than the OEN equivalent. This can be clearly seen, for example, in the two editions of *Sense and Sensibility*. Unluckily for Claire Lamont (OEN), she has to bat against Tony Tanner (PEL). Her account of the novel is traditional, correct and unexceptionable, on the premise that *Sense and Sensibility* 'is a study of contrasting temperaments', as indeed is announced in its title and revealed in its formal organization. But this account does not touch upon the novel's real drama, the human drama of the struggle between the life-force of Marianne Dashwood and the smothering pressure of society exerted upon her by her sister and by the others around her. Dr Tanner's engagement with this dynamic centre is intensely challenging, intellectually exciting, as the novel itself is; and his essay helps us in our understanding of the novel's greatness, so often unnoticed. For me (and it may be for Dr Tanner too) it is the most poignant and most nearly tragic of Jane Austen's works. While we have to be properly grateful for this plenitude of texts (and their accompanying criticism) and properly respectful of Chapman's pioneering, nonetheless anyone who carries out a systematic and questioning scrutiny of the explanatory notes to these editions may want to think again. Firstly, he will begin to see that the extent and complexity of Chapman's apparatus are deceptive. There is all the appearance of blanket-coverage, of a net so closely drawn that little or nothing can slip through. But someone who reads the novels with a fresh and enquiring eye, who bothers to question the meaning and implication of the words on the page, who seeks to understand, for example, what Jane Austen means in *Northanger Abbey* by the wealth of detail and activity with which she surrounds General Tilney (as a pamphleteer; in his pose as a mysterious man-of-affairs, sitting up at night, as he claims, to brood upon the state of the nation; in his extraordinary kitchens, equipped (Heath-Robinsonishly ?) with culinary devices of his own invention; in his possession of a kitchen-garden of staggering size and content) — someone who bothers to ask himself what Jane Austen means by all this, whether she meant anything or nothing, will get no help from Chapman, or, to be quite fair, from anyone else, editor, historian or critic alike (including Dr Craik). Perhaps the as yet unpublished *Northanger Abbeys* of the OET or PEL will rectify this. But it is not rash to guess that they won't. I say this on the evidence of the present record, since the notes to the novels so far published, in both editions, are so dependent upon Chapman, sometimes ludicrously so. In the PEL *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, a note discusses a reference to Columella in chapter 19: 'It has been established that this reference is not to the Roman agricultural writer, Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, but to Columella, the Distressed Anchorite, a book published in 1776 by Richard Graves (1715-1804). . .' (and so on, for a further eleven lines). Do we really need this pedantic denial, considering that the person who mentions Columella is the sweet and simple Mrs Dashwood, whose acquaintance with Roman agricultural writers would have been rather slight, if it ever existed? We might think the note slightly pompous, and misleading too, in its opening words, since the discovery is no prize of recent scholarship but the observation of a Mr A. L. Humphreys and first revealed to the world in *Notes and Queries* for 28 November 1914. It was subsequently recorded in Chapman's edition, from which the compiler of the PEL notes (surely not Dr Tanner!) borrowed it. Of course, not all the notes are as silly as this. But the hand and shadow of Chapmanism fall heavily across the notes to both these modern editions: their inclusions and omissions seem to reflect his own range of knowledge and interest; and they certainly fall short of the expectations, even the reasonable expectations, raised by his prefatory statement to the Oxford edition, where he refers to that 'complete enlightenment' which readers of Jane Austen are said to be looking for. Why does this question still arise in 1971, fifty years later, when there has been such a wreath of Jane Austen scholarship and criticism in the intervening years ? The answer to this is not simply an excessive reverence for Chapman's notes (and hence too for his sense of the content and meaning of the novels). The positive answer lies in the tendency of modern criticism to

treat Jane Austen as an ahistorical novelist.⁷ There are good reasons for doing so. She is so enjoyable, so readable, so readily accessible. The very surface of the novels — in the language and the witty, ironic point of view — is strikingly unarchaic and close (or, by the deception of art, seemingly close) to our own ways of thought and expression ; and the few archaicisms are easily dealt with on a dictionary basis. There is something modern also in the focus upon the psychological awareness and consciousness of the characters and in the author's controlling presence. The temptation to disregard the period aspect of the novels is further strengthened by their amenability to conceptual analysis in the interpretation of their themes (an approach indeed that is positively, if superficially, encouraged by the three 'ethical' titles) and in the exploration of their rich intellectual and moral organization. Moreover, the rhetoricians of fiction have seized upon Jane Austen as one of the supreme artists of the novel, of commanding interest for the analysis of the triumphs of technique in her narrative mode. The tendency, in all this, has been to regard the novels as autonomous verbal structures, closed systems, which provide, each within itself, the terms for its understanding. Jane Austen's concern is seen to be with human nature and human values and these matters are timeless. In taking her own society for the stage and setting for the novels it is said that she was merely turning to the material to hand; that she was concerned not with the face and form of the Regency world but with its inhabitants; and that the foreground identity that we call the comedy-of-manners is simply the costume of the age, beneath which stand the essential and unchanging facts of personality and character and human experience, facts that we can grasp and penetrate in Jane Austen by dint of our own native intelligence and sensibility. This, anyway, is the general theory. It is no joke to say that Jane Austen is a critic's novelist. There is no doubt that the critical mind is particularly attracted by the abundant intelligence and thoughtfulness of the novels, and by their analytical and defining tendency, so wonderfully opened and extended by the reservations and possibilities of irony. Some of the very best critical essays have been those which reveal the critic's excited recognition of the author's qualities in himself. Characteristically, the only history to be invoked is literary history. In the interpretation of *Mansfield Park*, for example, there is abundant discussion of the various ways in which *Lovers Vows* may be supposed to provide a suggestive and significant pattern or analogy to the relationships between the young people rehearsing the play and to the development of these relationships, in the criss-cross of pairings, as the action of the novel unfolds. Chapman reprints the play entire, in the text of the fifth edition of Mrs Inchbald's version (1798), together with three contemporary engravings, one of Mrs Inchbald herself, one of scene 2, act 5, and an 1805 portrait of the actress Mrs H. Johnston who took the part of Agatha Friburg in a production at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. But, quitting literature for Regency England, in which the novel is set, Chapman, and later editors, have nothing to say about Jane Austen's purpose in making Sir Thomas Bertram a plantationowner, with estates in the West Indies.⁸ The abolition of the slave-trade had been legislated in 1807, after years of protest and agitation, and in 1815 the slave trade was still a sensitive topic for Mrs Elton in *Emma*. For the mechanics of the plot, Sir Thomas has to be got out of the way so that the young people can run riot at *Mansfield Park*; and the journey to Antigua ensures that he is far enough away for sufficient time. But such a journey, such a slave association, cannot have been unequivocal. Some at least of Jane Austen's contemporary readers would have been ready to attribute the insecure morality of the *Mansfield* household to

⁷ See, for example, *Jane Austen* by Yasmine Gooneratne, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 16/- (paper). This is a sane and careful account of the novels; but it approaches them as if their time reality is a kind of 'permanent past-present'.

⁸ Compare with the historical approach of Avrom Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park*, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, \$4.00.

the character of the Bertram family fortunes. Equally, they would have seen aspects of the plantation-owner in Sir Thomas's rule of his family, which is well-meaning but stupidly, insensitively and expediently exerted. Like so many of his kind, Sir Thomas is a Christian gentleman, well-meaning and principled. But these are the men who can work evil as insidiously and blindly as the deepest villains.

A similar kind of critical emphasis can be seen in interpretations of *Sense and Sensibility*. Again, the history brought to bear is almost solely literary history — in the analysis of Marianne Dashwood as a caricature of the heroine of sentimental fiction and in the elucidation of other jokes on the conventions of literary sentimentality. A much broader placing is called for. The novel draws upon a very complex movement of ideas deriving from Rousseauism, the French Revolution, late eighteenth-century ideas of personal liberty, especially the possibilities of freedom for women so widely and forcefully discussed by Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft and other polemicists of the 1790s. *Sense and Sensibility* is a Romantic-Revolutionary novel. In this case, the heroine falls victim to the coercive powers of the Rational-Traditional style of bourgeois society. She is broken in the struggle ; can only survive processed and depersonalized; and the illness that enables her to survive is in part a psychological withdrawal, a self-destruction, a madness, whose historical relevance to the period is brilliantly discussed in Dr Tanner's PEL Introduction. I have already mentioned some of the questions surrounding General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*. When, as very rarely, the critics run to any discussion of his place in the novel, it is to look at his part in the scheme of Gothic satire, in which he stands (labelled by the author) as a modern Montoni, a west-country version of Mrs Radcliffe's villainous lord of *The Castle of Udolpho*. The joke is obvious enough. The *Abbey* is an anti-*Udolpho* : bright and clean and hospitable and with every modern comfort and luxury. The General is an anti-Montoni, no stage villain, with no obvious villainy in his appearance and in what he says and does, but an urbane man-of-property and man-about-town. Jane Austen's joke, within this, is of course that the General really is a scheming, ruthless villain; and that Catherine Morland really is his victim, an innocent abroad ; and that there really is Gothicism around in Regency England, however much a Henry Tilney may laugh one's fears away and however much one may laugh at one's own heated literary fantasies. But it is not sufficient to keep to these literary terms of reference. They leave far too much unexplained about the General and about *Northanger Abbey* and they deflect our attention from the social, historical reality which he and his property embody. In his personal character (as a shrewd, ruthless, martinettish, head-of-the-family) he is drawn simply and externally in a few broad strokes, whereas in his range of activities and possessions, Jane Austen provides him with a more detailed and specific persona than any other character in all the six novels. Yet this remarkable and complex persona-by-context has never been explained (or, as far as I know, even noticed). It may seem curious that this terrain still remains unexplored in the work of a novelist so closely studied, so extensively analysed, interpreted and commented on; a novelist so celebrated for her rigorous selectivity and economy of detail, whose meanings seem to have been so endlessly searched. An interesting case of this neglect occurs in chapter 22, where Catherine Morland first sees the extraordinary kitchen-garden. The scene is striking: 'The walls seemed countless in number, endless in length; a village of hot-houses seemed to arise among them, and a whole parish to be at work within the inclosure.' The style is striking, too, in this unusual extravagance of figure and language. A Swiftian fantasy plays over the distinctive energy of Jane Austen's curt rhythms. Clearly, the reader is being alerted. But to what end? What does it mean that the kitchen-garden should run to such a wallage ? to such a range of hot-housing ? to such a population of workers ? In part, we can understand this as impressionism, Catherine's dizzied vision, her wide-eyed wonder, her discovery of the *Abbey's* modern Gothicism, its power to

amaze, even to terrify. This is part of the figurative truth about the reality of the garden and its contents. But what is this reality? There is virtually nothing by way of explanation. We have to rely, firstly, on the words of a suspect reporter, General Tilney himself, who ventures that these hot-houses are 'unrivalled in the kingdom', and, with another flurry of modesty, confesses that 'If he had a hobby-horse, it was that. He loved a garden . . . he loved good fruit'. Beyond this, there is no explanation, no clue. How are we to interpret the scene? Were hot-houses a common feature of country estates at this time? or a wild, eccentric extravagance? Is the General here revealed as a flamboyant millionaire? a fruiterian epicure? a gentleman-horticulturist? a market-gardener on the side? For Jane Austen's contemporaries the answers are clear enough; and they would be able to fit these kitchen-garden details to all the other details of the General's activities and possessions. They would read a distinct and fairly elaborate portrait of a specific, historical type of late eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century gentleman, whose life is engaged with some of the most important social and cultural currents of the time.⁹ He is as distinct a type as any of Peacock's satirical portraits (although, of course, he illustrates precisely how Jane Austen transcends Peacock in carrying the weight of cultural and historical meaning within a dramatic character free of caricature or allegoricalism). When Jane Austen wrote her 'Advertisement' to *Northanger Abbey* in 1816, apologizing for 'those parts of the work which thirteen years' (since its revision in 1803, and the 'many more' since it was begun, in about 1798) 'have made comparatively obsolete', she was drawing attention to the strictly period or historical aspects of its social scene. The central issue that arises from this, for the reader of the 1970s, is the weight that we should give to historical meaning in our understanding of the novel today. In general, there is a consent to the notion of reading Jane Austen 'socially' — that is, in seeing her as the novelist of a class society, observing and commenting upon social change and social movement, not so much as a writer concerned with change as a process but fascinated phenomenologically, in the manifestations of change as material for the comedy-of-manners (as when the Dashwood daughters look askance at the vulgar Mrs Jennings, with her 'trade' associations, or at the Steeles, with their lowerclass vulgarisms of speech and manners, or when Emma Woodhouse bridles at the 'mercantile' Mrs Elton from 'trading' Bristol). Some claims are more ambitious. In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) Ian Watt talks of the supreme brilliance of *Emma*, its Fieldingesque strength 'in conveying the sense of society as a whole'. How do we reconcile this with Arnold Kettle's view that 'Highbury is offered to us as Highbury', that it is the microscopic local scene, representative of nothing but itself?¹⁰ In a recent essay Graham Hough accounts the novels as 'socially and morally orientated to the mid-eighteenth century',¹¹ whereas Raymond Williams (in the most suggestive of all analyses of Jane Austen's social-historical themes and preoccupations)¹² sees the inclination of the novels to be forward, towards the fiction of the later nineteenth century, rather than to the past. Our difficulty, in all these cases, is to know what to believe. The arguments are drawn with sophistication and skill. Rhetorically, persuasively, there is nothing missing. They take strength from the flourishing modern traditions of theoretical discussion and from an awareness of the need for an historically grounded approach. But the theory and the good intentions have outrun the evidence. We have a model in Bronowski's *William Blake*, where the critical interpretation is informed by a thorough and detailed understanding of the historical-cultural relationship between Blake's creations and the world and age in which and for which they were created. This is the kind of

⁹ I must excuse myself from explaining this portrait; this would be an essay in itself, involving a wide range of historical evidence.

¹⁰ *An Introduction to the English Novel*, vol. i, Hutchinson, 1955.

¹¹ 'Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen', *Critical Quarterly*, Autumn 1970.

¹² *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Chatto and Windus, 1970, 30/-.

account that we need for Jane Austen — grounded in social, cultural and intellectual history, as well as in the literary history of the period — and it is this account that editions of the novels should properly help us to discover.