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Jane Austen 1775 – 1975

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The year 1975 has been the bi-centenary of Jane Austen's birth. For lovers of English literature, this has been an important occasion, celebrating one of the world's great novelists, some say England's supreme novelist, a writer who has come to be studied and examined in schools and universities throughout the world, and whose six books have been translated into more than thirty languages. The celebrations have been formal and impressive. International scholars have gathered at Jane Austen Conferences to exchange their learned views. Her works have been discussed yet again in bi-centennial studies and collections of critical essays. And the British Post Office has accorded her the rare honour of a special set of stamps, showing leading characters from the novels; a rare honour indeed, since the only woman hitherto philatelizeed was Florence Nightingale, with one stamp, whereas Jane Austen has been accorded no less than four.

But alongside these official celebrations there has also been a much quieter, much more local, series of unofficial celebrations, such as in Jane Austen's birthplace, the little Hampshire village of Steventon (population 195), which has celebrated its famous daughter with a bi-centenary masked ball, an eighteenth-century fair and a concert in the church hall. These are the homely and unpretentious tributes of genuine affection. For awhile Jane Austen is unquestionably a *great* novelist, she is also a popular novelist, enjoyed by multitudes of readers who know nothing and care nothing about her reputation amongst scholars and critics. She is popular not for her appearance on university reading-lists but for the best of reasons – because she is a pleasure to read. Of all great writers, she is surely the most accessible, the most immediately engaging. Her characters come across with a living vitality. They populate our imaginations more vividly than most of the people we meet in actual life. The world in which they move is easily and delightfully entered; and, once entered, is absorbing and containing. As Clerihew Bentley put it, 'The novels of Jane Austen/Are the ones to get lost in'. Their wit, wisdom, sympathy and intelligence are as clear to us in the 1970's as they were to the Regency audience a century-and-a-half ago.

No doubt Jane Austen would be gratified to see that the novels have lasted so well. No doubt, too, she would be amused to see so many scholars and critics poring of seriously over her works; and appalled to see so many students being examined on the brilliance of Elizabeth Bennet, the sublime folly of Mr Collins or the stupidity of Mrs Bennet. In this retrospective vein, there is a remarkable contrast between Jane Austen's modern international reputation and the fierce seclusion and privacy of her actual life. She was determined to be a *published* author and had to wait until 1811, when she was thirty-four, having worked for over twenty years,

before her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, appeared in print. She was equally determined to be an anonymous author. Only the family knew about her writing; she even tried to keep it a secret from the servants; and the public were kept in the dark until 1818 when a 'Biographical Notice' came out posthumously with *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.

If there had been any temptation in fame, Jane Austen could have enjoyed the glamour of a literary reputation. During her lifetime she had a small but highly appreciative and discerning audience, including the Prince Regent, to whom, by royal invitation, she dedicated *Emma*. The reviewers welcomed the novels and in his famous review of *Emma*, in 1816 Sir Walter Scott provided the unnamed 'lady' with a tribute as appreciative and historically important as any novelist has ever received. In *Emma*, Scott greeted the arrival of 'the modern novel' and acknowledged this anonymous author's feat in creating a kind of novel capable of rendering the experience of ordinary life realistically, entertainingly and with wit and penetration.

Jane Austen read this very review and was interested in what Scott had to say. She cared about the success of her books and their reception. But she kept quite clear of literary society. 'A wild beast' was how she described herself. The metaphor is unexpectedly powerful. But it conveys an accurate gauge of Jane Austen's need for privacy and her dependence upon the even tempo and stability of family life in the country. This is shown plainly in the biographical facts – that she never married; that she passed her life with the family; and that the most barren period of her life was from 1801 – when the Austen's left the village of Steventon, in Hampshire, where her father had been vicar – until 1809, when Jane, her sister Cassandra (who also remained unmarried) and her mother (Mr Austen having died in 1805) came to live at Chawton, again in Hampshire. Once she was settled at Chawton Cottage, Jane Austen took up the manuscripts of the two early novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), works which she had first drafted in the late 1790s and which she now revised for publication; and at Chawton between 1811 and 1817, she went on to write *Mansfield Park* (1818), *Emma* (1816) and *Persuasion* (1818), she revised *Northanger Abbey* (1818), another early work, and finally, in January 1817, she began a seventh novel, known to-date as *Sanditon*, of which she was only able to write eleven-and-a-half chapters before the weakness of her last illness forced her to abandon the manuscript on March 18, exactly four months before her death on 18 July 1817.

The importance of these circumstances is mirrored in the novels themselves, with their emphasis upon family relationships and upon the heroines as solitary figures. '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work upon' – this was her advice to a novel-writing niece, advice that Jane Austen herself practised in holding such a tight focus on the family life of the country gentry of Regency England, the small world in which she was born and bred and within which she passed a lifetime, observing and recreating this world in fiction.

Different readers get different things from Jane Austen. Some seek escapism and lose themselves in the richness and depth of her characters and the world of their existence. Some enjoy her for historical reasons – for the accuracy and realism of her picture of English middle-class life, and for the illumination they provide upon the English society and the English way of life. This is not an unreasonable expectation, since Jane Austen is the most English of all English novelists, the most expressive of English culture and the quintessential Englishness of the landed gentry in their own homes, an Englishness that has by no means disappeared, even in this late decade of the twentieth century. Some readers go for her stylishness and wit, the subtlety and precision of her irony, the technical virtuosity of her narrative technique and the sheer artistic brilliance of the novels. Some readers are especially excited by the comedy of

ideas, Jane Austen's verbalism, a semantic enquiry which extends to meaning of the words it explores – 'sense', 'sensitivity', 'pride', 'prejudice', 'persuasion'. 'love', 'duty', 'propriety', 'reason', 'civility', etc etc. Jane Austen was blessed with a mind whose creative capacity was geared to analysis; and the analytical direction of the novels in turn fascinates readers with an analytical bias – witness the volumes of critical analysis, much of it heavily semantic and verbally interpretative, that the novels have inspired.

Many commentators have remarked that while other reputations have waxed and waned and been buffeted by the changing winds of fashion, Jane Austen's reputation has remained secure. There have been innumerable reinterpretations of Jane Austen but no revaluations, nor any need for revaluation. Nonetheless, there is a point in understanding their special relevance to our situation in the 1970's. That 1975 happens also to be International Women's Year is the purest coincidence. Yet it is a useful coincidence, reminding us of the predicament that faced women two hundred years ago in Jane Austen's England – to have no other destiny in life, no other career or occupation, than to be a wife and mother, socially and legally subject to the wishes of her family before marriage and to the wishes of her husband within marriage. From novel to novel, this situation stands as Jane Austen's central concern. The Conventions of Regency society, and the particular conventions surrounding marriage in the families of the landed gentry, are remote from us to-day. Nevertheless, men and women in widely different societies and cultures can recognize their present problems in the problems that face Jane Austen's heroines. In essence, these arise in any situation where the individual's freedom of choice is defined, bounded, sometimes stifled by the values and conventions of his family and his social group; in situations where one has to struggle to preserve one's sense of independence and integrity; where it becomes necessary to evolve a personal morality of compromise. This is part of the complex fate of modern man and Jane Austen was the first English novelist to explore this aspect of social existence. A women writer, her donne the women's world, naturally she pursues this theme through the experiences of her heroines on the path to marriage. For the woman of Regency England, this was life's sole adventure, the stage upon which their destiny and fulfilment was achieved. Regency men had professions and battlefields, paths of action quite apart from marriage. And for men and women to-day, there are different paths again. But the essential questions remain; and the aesthetic permanence of the novels as works of art is matched by the permanence of their human preoccupations.