The *Myth* of "Everybody's Dear Jane"

A Re-assessment of Jane Austin

by David Monaghan

In "The Lesson of Balzac," written in 1905, Henry James describes Jane Austen as "their 'dear,' our dear, everybody's dear, Jane."(1) He is moved to refer to her with such heavy irony by his irritation at what he perceives to be the illegitimate reasons for the growing popularity of a writer who had been largely ignored by the public for forty years after her death. So far as James is concerned Jane Austen's popularity has little to do with her artistic merits. In fact, for him, she is merely a writer of "light felicity" who "leaves us hardly more curious of her process, or of the experience in her that fed it, than the brown thrush who tells his story from the garden bough."(2) Rather, he believes that her fame results from extraneous biographical factors. Readers are fascinated, James argues, by the phenomenon of the secluded spinster who mused as she toiled over her workbasket, and sometimes recorded these musings in graceful and facile novels:

> The key to Jane Austen's fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her facility, in fact of her unconsciousness: as if, at the most, for difficulty, for embarrassment, she sometimes, over her workbasket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one

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> may say, into wool-gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of these precious moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination.(3)

James here demonstrates a remarkable blindness to Jane Austen's very real achievement as a writer. This was possibly a result of his conviction that women novelists in general are "ever gracefully, comfortably, enviably, unconscious (it would be too much to call them even suspicious) of the requirements of form."(4) However, he is perceptive about the existence of a Jane Austen cult, and about the reasons for its emergence.

This cult was later given a name by Rudyard Kipling in his story "The Janeites," published in 1926. "The Janeites" is a half-mocking, half-affectionate account of how a cockney mess-waiter in World War I discovers the existence of a "very select society,"(5)entrance into which is dependent on a knowledge of Tilniz an' trapdoors (p. 168) and on being "a Janeite in your 'eart." (p. 188) By diligently reading and memorizing six novels, which "weren't adventurous, nor smutty, nor what you'd even call interestin'--all about girls o' seventeen . . . , not certain 'oom they'd like to marry: an' their dances an' card-parties an' picnics, and their young blokes goin' off to London on 'orseback for 'air-cuts an' shaves," (p. 170) the mess-waiter too learns to love Jane and become a Janeite. Eventually, membership in this secret society saves his life because, during a frantic retreat, he wins a place on an already over-crowded hospital train by commenting to the matron, a fellow Janeite, that one of the nurses is like Miss Bates, from Emma.

The Janeites, then, did not receive their name until 1926. However, as Henry James points out, the cult began about forty years after Jane Austen's death, and, in fact, received its main impetus from J.E. Austen-Leigh's Memoir of his aunt, published in 1870. Austen-Leigh is crucial in the evolution of the Jane Austen cult because he created the prototypical figure of " Aunt Jane," (6)a spinster lady possessed of "a sweet temper and loving heart," (p. 2) for whom "Her own family were so much, and the rest of the world so little" (p. 12) and whose life was ruled by "piety." (p. 23) Austen-Leigh also firmly established the typical Janeite reading of the novels. Although he echoes the positive reviews of Archbishop Whately, Macauley and Lewes, who praised Jane Austen for her skill in characterization and her accurate depiction of manners, Austen-Leigh is unwilling to rank his aunt with the greatest novelists. This is because he sees her as a woman of limited horizons, who knew little about politics, law or medicine, and who thus

restricted herself to "3 or 4 families in a village." In Charlotte Bronte's words, Austen-Leigh believes that Jane Austen simply presents us with "an accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face" and that "she does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well; there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting."(7) In commending Jane Austen's novels to our attention, Austen-Leigh emphasizes mainly the good character of the author and the remarkable fact that they were composed so casually by an ordinary woman as she sat in her drawing room continually interrupted by the demands of her family. Fragile as his plea may seem to be, it has satisfied not only the Janeites who irritated Henry James and amused Rudyard Kipling, but also increasing numbers of modern readers, the most enthusiastic of whom have given their cult official status in the shape of the Jane Austen Society.

I would like to challenge the Janeite approach in two ways, first, by suggesting that Jane Austen was not entirely a "dear" person, and second, by arguing that her novels are remarkable as far more than examples of what a secluded spinster could produce out of limited experience and difficult compositional circumstances.

In order to create his dear Aunt Jane, Austen-Leigh ignores some of the extremely sharp and often unkind things that Jane Austen writes in her letters to her sister Cassandra. He claims that "Her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous led her to play with all the common-places of everyday life, whether as regarded persons or things; but she never played with its serious duties or responsibilities, nor did she ever turn individuals into ridicule." (p. 92) Yet, this same Jane Austen is capable of the following extremely personalized piece of cynicism about a bereavement. "The Debaries persist in being afflicted at the death of their Uncle, of whom they now say they saw a great deal in London."(8) Of the same family, she also says "I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me." (p. 92) Jane Austen's comments about the Barnwalls, whom she met at Lyme Regis, are scarcely more charitable, since she describes them as "the son and son's wife of an Irish viscount, bold queer-looking people, just fit to be quality at Lyme." (p. 142) However, far worse than any of the above, because it is gratuitously cruel (whereas they are honest, if unkind), is her remark that, "Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband." (p. 24)

Aunt Jane may have loved her little nephews and nieces. However, as she reveals in her novels, her view of children was not quite the sentimentalized one that Austen-Leigh leads us

to believe. Whenever children appear, which is rare because Jane Austen keeps them mostly off-stage, they display much of the same selfishness, cunning and stupidity as adults. Lady Middleton's children in Sense and Sensibility serve as good examples: "Lady Middleton seemed to be roused to enjoyment only by the entrance of her four noisy children after dinner, who pulled her about, tore her clothes, and put an end to every kind of discourse except what related to themselves."(9) And later, Jane Austen comments on little Annamaria's response to attempts to quell her crying: "She was seated in her mother's lap, covered with kisses, her wound bathed with lavender-water, by one of the Miss Steeles, and her mouth stuffed with sugar plums by the other. With such a reward for her tears, the child was too wise to cease crying. She still screamed and sobbed lustily, kicked her two brothers for offering to touch her, and all their united soothings were ineffectual."(Vol. I, p. 121)

The real Jane Austen, however, perhaps deviates most from her nephew's idealized and very Victorian portrait, in her obvious, frank and very eighteenth-century interest in sexual matters. Her account of attempts to identify the notorious Miss Twisleton at a Bath ball, for example, suggests a delighted curiosity rather than moral outrage: "I am proud to say that I have a good eye for an Adulteress, for tho' repeatedly assured that another in the same party was the She, I fixed upon the right one from the first." (p. 127) A similar freedom from prudishness is apparent in other letters. Of a lady with too many children, Jane Austen comments "Good Mrs. Deedes!--I hope she will get the better of this Marianne, & then I wd recommend to her & Mr. D the simple regimen of separate rooms." (p. 480) And, of a visit to a fashionable boarding school, she says, "The appearance of the room, so totally unschool-like, amused me very much . . . , if it had not been for some naked Cupids over the Mantlepiece, which must be a fine study for the Girls, one should never have smelt instruction." (p. 309)

Jane Austen's novels are rarely as explicit as this, probably because the increasing influence of the Evangelicals imposed many restrictions on the subject matter of fiction. It was in 1804, for instance, that Thomas Bowdler, from whom the word bowdlerize derives, produced his Family Shakespeare, in which the plays were expurgated "in the interests of decency and delicacy." (10) Her only obvious dirty joke is to be found in Mansfield Park when Mary Crawford, in the course of a conversation about Admirals, admits that she has seen too much of "Rears, and Vices." (Vol. III, p. 60) Nevertheless, had Kipling's mess-waiter looked harder he would have found far more than this which is "smutty." Alice

Chandler, in her essay "'A Pair of Fine Eyes': Jane Austen's Treatment of Sex," makes an attempt at tracking down all of Jane Austen's sexual references. Some of Chandler's examples seem a little far-fetched, but sufficient of them are based on a firm foundation for us to accept her contention that Jane Austen was interested in chronicling the "disruptive and disorderly force of sex."(11)

In Emma, for example, many references are made to the charade or riddle, "Kitty, a Fair but Frozen Maid," which is usually ascribed to David Garrick, but it is never quoted. This is probably because it is obscene. Thus, Alice Chandler says:

> Read with a knowledge of eighteenth-century slang, the first stanza reveals itself to be about a man who has contracted venereal disease ("a flame I yet deplore") from patronizing "frozen kitty" (a "forward kittie," as in some versions, would be a bold prostitute). Having cured himself in the omitted second stanza, he relates how he now derives pleasures from frequenting only the virginal Fanny. The reference in the last 3 lines --"some willing victim bleeds"-- is literally hymeneal. The solution to the final stanza, "a chimney sweep," must have been productive as much drawing-room mirth. . . because "chimney sweeping" was a well-known cant term for sexual intercourse.(12)

Similarly, Willoughby's offer of horse, Queen Mab, to Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility contains within it an acknowledgement of his underlying sexual ambitions, for Queen Mab in A Midsummer Night's Dream is the "fairies midwife:" This is the hag when maids lie on their backs/ That presses them and learns them first to bear."

The sexuality in Jane Austen's novels is not always buried within allusions, but is sometimes embedded in her symbolism. For example, the incident of the locked gate at Sotherton in Mansfield Park, with its references to gates, keys, gardens, wildernesses, pointed spikes and torn dresses, is laden with hints as to the implications of Maria Bertram's desire to go exploring with Henry Crawford.

However, unless we read Jane Austen through the tinted spectacles of a Janeite, we do not need to delve into the subtleties of allusions and symbolism to discover that she recognized the sexual basis of human relationships. In her novels, she repeatedly demonstrates that the sexual impulse is strong enough to drive people outside the boundaries of conventional morality. Willoughby, in Sense and Sensibility, turns out to have been the seducer of Colonel Brandon's ward, Eliza; Wickham, in Pride and Prejudice, attempts to seduce Georgiana

Darcy and elopes with Lydia Bennet to London, where it turns out that his intentions are not matrimonial; Mary Crawford, in Mansfield Park, makes frequent allusions to the loose morality of London society, and her brother Henry caps his sexual adventures by eloping with the married Maria Rushworth; Harriet Smith, in Emma, is illegitimate; and William Elliot, in Persuasion, seduces Mrs. Clay to prevent her marrying his uncle.

Jane Austen's heroes and heroines do not, of course, give in to their sexual urges. However, this is not to say that there is not an element of sexual attraction in their relationships, and any sensitive reader of Pride and Prejudice, in which Darcy's relationship with Elizabeth Bennet is full of sparkling eyes, glowing complexions, significant glances and fumbling conversations, will recognize the falsity of Charlotte Bronte's claim that "the passions are unknown" to Jane Austen. Indeed, unless we recognize the sexual energy which flows between Elizabeth and Darcy, their relationship has no basis because, for much of the novel, they consciously dislike each other, and it is only a physical attraction which draws them together.

In trying to contradict the image of "dear Jane" I have undoubtedly overstated her cynicism, misanthropy and sexual interests. However, my intention has not been to produce a well-rounded portrayal of Jane Austen, but rather to suggest that she is a much more complex person than the Janeites would admit. In fact, that she is complex enough to have written novels that are far more than accurate portrayals of certain character types and of the manners of the gentry.

In order to establish what kind of novels Jane Austen actually did write, I would now like to examine her chosen subject--the courtship problems and manners of three or four genteel families in a village--because I believe that rather than defining her limitations, it provides the key to an understanding of the breadth of her concerns. Essentially, I am trying to elaborate on George Saintsbury's comment that "if her world is a microcosm, the cosmic quality of it is at least as eminent as the littleness." (13) My analysis will focus on two main topics--Jane Austen's concentration on the gentry and her concern with manners and the role of women.

The fact that Jane Austen writes almost entirely about the gentry, and only occasionally concerns herself with either the higher reaches of the aristocracy or the lower of the middle class and the common people, has frequently been cited as evidence of her limitations as a social novelist. This notion that a writer's subject matter in itself allows us to make assumptions about the value of his work strikes me as dubious. Few novelists

in fact possess the kind of scope which Jane Austen is condemned for lacking, and if she is to be seen as deficient so must Evelyn Waugh be for writing mainly about the English upper classes, William Faulkner for dealing with the rural South and James Joyce for locating his novels in Dublin. Conversely, writers like James Michener and Leon Uris, whose pulp epics range over broad expanses of time and place, should be accorded greater prestige. We do not, of course, prefer Michener to Faulkner or Uris to Joyce, because in these cases we examine not merely the writer's subject but what he does with it. If we approach Jane Austen in the same way rather than automatically assuming that her vision is limited, we can see that she chose to write about the gentry, not because she was not interested in the rest of society, but because, in seeking a vantage point from which to view her world, she decided to move to the centre of it. Eighteenth-century English morality was based on the code of the gentleman which defined that the individual's social responsibility consisted of demonstrating a concern for and an ability to serve the needs of others. While all ranks were supposed to pursue this ideal it was felt that some were better qualified to achieve it than others. The middle and lower classes were considered morally doubtful because, as a result of working for a living, they did not have the time needed to cultivate the proper virtues of the gentleman. Of the two leisured classes, the aristocracy and the gentry, the latter was felt to be the likelier to possess moral integrity because, lacking the temptation to indulge in the decadent life of the court, its members stayed in their country houses and executed the duties they owed to their families, tenants and villagers. The gentry, then, provided eighteenth-century England with its moral heartbeat, and the writer, like Jane Austen, who monitors this heartbeat can truly claim to be dealing with issues, the ramifications of which are extremely wide-ranging.

However, those who believe her to be limited would argue that, even allowing the importance of the gentry, Jane Austen still fails because she does not fully examine the life of this class. Jane Austen, they would claim, only shows us the gentry engaged in the leisure pursuits of dancing, eating, visiting and talking, and, out of an ignorance of such topics, completely ignores its involvement in estate management, military affairs (even though she wrote during the Napoleonic Wars), the administration of justice and the church. This charge in fact is not entirely true. Jane Austen was certainly aware of all the above aspects of the life of a gentleman and mentions them from time to time. Mr. Knightley, in Emma, is frequently preoccupied with his estate and the execution of justice, the war with France enters into Pride and Prejudice and plays a very central role in Per-

suasion, and Edmund Bertram, in Mansfield Park, engages in serious discussions of his duties as a clergyman. (14) Nevertheless, it must be dealt with because, whether from choice or ignorance, Jane Austen did largely concern herself with the polite function of the gentry and can be accurately defined as a novelist of manners.

As was the case with the issue of Jane Austen's restricted social range, we must be careful of making any a priori assumptions that literature which deals with social rituals and formality is necessarily limited. Lionel Trilling, for example, has gone so far as to argue that an examination of the manners of an age is as good a route as any to uncovering its significance: "the great novelists knew that manners indicate the largest intentions of men's souls as well as the smallest and they are perpetually concerned to catch the meaning of every dim implicit hint."(15) In Jane Austen's case, however, we do not have to rely on any general justification of the novel of manners because, if we consider eighteenth-century Conservative attitudes towards manners, we can see that at this time manners were considered to be inextricably linked with morals and ultimately with the survival of the nation. To understand this we must digress briefly and look at some aspects of Conservative thought.

The Conservative vision springs from the assumption that society is a divine creation in which things are so beautifully ordered that each person living in it is a microcosm of the whole. Thus, although some have greater roles to play than others, the conduct of every member has a direct bearing on the health of the total organism. Consequently, we find in the eighteenth-century a great interest in the individual's moral performance, which, since this is a very formal society, frequently manifests itself in a display of manners. By behaving politely, the individual is considered to be carrying out the single most important social function of demonstrating an awareness of, and an ability to serve, the needs of others. The act of opening a door for a lady is thus, in a sense, as vital to the preservation of English society as serving in Parliament or administering justice. Indeed, since the demands of the code of politeness are subtle, unremitting and enter into every aspect of life, it could be argued that displays of good manners are more important than the performance of the larger social duties, which make infrequent and obvious demands. The link between manners and social stability is made explicit by Edmund Burke, the most important expounder of Conservatism: "Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. . . . They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals,

they supply them, or they totally destroy them."(16)

That Jane Austen granted a similar significance to manners is made clear in one of her early stories, "Catharine." In reply to Catharine's claim that, "I have done nothing this evening that can contribute to overthrow the establishment of the kingdom," her aunt replies "You are Mistaken Child; . . . the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of its individuals, and any who offends in so gross a manner against decorum and propriety is certainly hastening its ruin." (Vol. VI, pp. 232-33)

Once the reader recognizes the larger implications of manners, much that initially seems trivial in Jane Austen's novels grows in importance. The heroines, for example, are not in fact primarily engaged in mindless husband-hunts as they attend their balls and dinners and make visits, but are being initiated into the manners and hence the morals of their society. The marriages into which they finally enter do not serve simply as convenient climaxes to conventional romance plots but are symbolic of the heroine's achievement of maturity and of her worthiness to be admitted into the adult world. Moreover, this education in manners is not a one-way process because, as it strives to deal with the needs of the initiate, so the society must re-examine its own moral condition. In almost all of Jane Austen's novels, the society discovers, in the course of educating the heroine, that it too must correct defects.

In Emma, for example, both Emma and her community, the village of Highbury, are in need of improvement. Before she can be considered a mature adult Emma must learn to modify her egotistical approach to experience, and to accord things outside of herself their true value, rather than trying to manipulate them to fit her own needs. And Highbury must come to recognize that unless it rouses itself from its contented slumber, and accepts the responsibility of adapting and changing, it will inevitably die. This process of mutual education, which constitutes the main theme of Emma, is worked out entirely at the level of manners. Emma's egotism is reflected in repeated lapses in good manners, culminating in her inexcusable rudeness to Miss Bates at Box Hill, and the moribund nature of Highbury is indicated most clearly by the fact that the formal social occasion, which is the most important vehicle for an expression of politeness, has been allowed to lapse. There are no longer dances at the Crown and Highbury's main families rarely entertain formally. Emma ultimately gains maturity by recognizing the implications of her bad manners, particularly of her rudeness to Miss Bates. And Highbury is forced by the demands of the emerging Emma and the newcomers Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton to revive its formal social life.

This results in a renewal of intense polite contact between its inhabitants and provides a vehicle for the reassertion of what is morally good and the rejection of what is bad. Having demonstrated the ability of manners to correct deficiencies in both heroine and community, Jane Austen is able to conclude her novel with an image of social harmony as Emma marries Mr. Knightley and is admitted into the adult world.

The larger social function of manners is nowhere more evident than in Persuasion, a novel in which Jane Austen at last seems to have lost faith in the essentially hierarchical, agrarian and gentlemanly world which she defended throughout her earlier works. The main representative of the gentry in Persuasion is Sir Walter Elliot, a man for whom external show has replaced a sense of duty. This is reflected in his manners which are aimed entirely at the glorification of the self and which have thus lost their function of reinforcing the ideal of service to others. Lacking the sound moral guidance of good manners, Sir Walter proves willing to rent out his estate at Kellynch, rather than cut back his expenditure on "Journeys, London, servants, horses, table." (Vol. V, p. 13) Yet, the gentleman is nothing without his estate because it represents his sphere of duty and provides him with the chance to attend to the needs of others.

Since Kellynch is to pass into the hands of William Elliot, an even more corrupt man, for whom manners are neither a moral guide nor merely empty show, but a means of masking the real self and its selfish goals, there seems little hope for a revival of the gentry. Therefore, Sir Walter's daughter, Anne, the only character in the novel who lives up to the standards of the old world, has to seek beyond her home for a sphere of action. This she eventually finds amongst the "new men" of the Navy. However, Anne discovers that in this new world her manners are of no more use as a means of moral communication than they were in the old. For, whereas in the old they have degenerated into empty display or a means of self-concealment, in the new, they are simply not understood. The world of the Navy has a pristine quality about it, but it is also unsophisticated, and has not developed any sense of the nuances of polite behavior. Thus, the individual must prove himself entirely through useful action and is deprived of the opportunity to repeatedly demonstrate his potential for such action through the medium of good manners.(17)

By the time she wrote Persuasion, Jane Austen seemed to have become so tired of the old order that she found the crudity of the new refreshing. Nevertheless, she does indicate that, in a society which lacks a coherent system of manners, it is much harder for individuals, particularly women, to

prove their worth. Captain Wentworth demonstrates his utility in the war. However, the novel repeatedly stresses the extent to which even the best of men are dependent on getting the right ship, the right weather and the appropriate timing of declaration of peace and renewals of hostility. Anne Elliot's task is still more difficult because, as a woman lacking a household, she has little opportunity for active demonstration of the excellence she repeatedly shows in her manners. As events turn out she is fortunate and Louisa Musgrove's fall from the Cobb at Lyme gives her a chance to demonstrate her worth and wins her the respect of the inhabitants of her new world. Nevertheless, the reader is left at the end of Persuasion with a profound sense that, had she not been lucky, Anne Elliot might have remained isolated and unrecognized.

Although Jane Austen avoids locating her new men in their proper sphere, the world she is describing in Persuasion is clearly the modern world of the entrepreneur and the industrialist, and she finds much of value in it. Captain Wentworth, for example, is obviously admired for his ability to rise through individual iniative rather than family connections and the novel accepts that his new prestige will be gauged by wealth rather than title. Nevertheless, if only by implication, Jane Austen does tell us that the old world was superior because, operating as it did around a universally accepted system of manners, it was able to offer the worthy individual an assurance that his value would be recognized and that an appropriate place would be found for him. Ironically, then, Jane Austen makes the larger social implications of politeness most clear in a novel that charts its breakdown.

With the exception of Persuasion, Jane Austen generally defends her society and its Conservative vision. Nevertheless, she was no mere apologist for the status quo, and in one area, at least, her concern with manners leads her to take a stance that places her outside the mainstream of her age. Through her examination of the woman's role in the polite world, Jane Austen comes to conclusions about her sex that were at odds with most contemporary opinion.

Our main sources of information about attitudes to women in the eighteenth century are the conduct-books, which were intended to instruct young ladies about their proper social role. We find a rather contradictory attitude to women in these books. On the one hand they accorded women great prestige as arbiters of manners and household managers, both functions of considerable importance in a society which, as we have already seen, granted such significance to manners, and which regarded the family as a microcosm of the larger society: "A man has been termed a microcosm; and

every family might also be called a state."(18) On the other hand, however, writers like the Rev. James Fordyce, Thomas Gisborne, Hannah More and Dr. Gregory all agreed that women are the mental inferiors of men, that they should not receive an equal education and that they should cultivate the virtues of submissiveness and meekness. Fordyce, for example, writes, "Nature appears to have formed the faculties of your sex for the most part with less vigour than those of ours" and then says of feminine education that "I do not wish to see [the female world] abound with metaphysicians, historians, speculative philosophers, or learned ladies of any kind. I should be afraid, lest the sex should lose in softness what they gained in force."(19) Dr. Gregory defines the virtuous woman thus: "One of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even by the gaze of admirers."(20)

Given this low opinion of women, we might question how sincere the writers of conduct-books are in claiming significance for the woman's rather restricted realms of manners and the home. Unless, perhaps, they simply did not recognize the contradictions implicit in ascribing a vital social role to a second-rate person. Whatever the reasons for these contradictions, the conduct books are unsatisfactory and, in her novels, Jane Austen endeavours to arrive at a more coherent definition of the feminine nature and social role.

Granted her belief in the importance of manners, it is not surprising that Jane Austen was willing to accept that women could achieve fulfilment as arbiters of manners. As I have already tried to demonstrate, her novels propose that, by receiving an education in manners, the heroines perform a vital social function and are accorded a worthy position in adult society. There is also evidence that Jane Austen, then, emerges as a much more formidable person and writer than the "dear Jane" stereotype would allow. Far from being a sweet, pious spinster who knew little of the world beyond her Steventon and Chawton homes, she was a strong-minded woman, who possessed a keen understanding of the structure of her society and of the position of her own sex within it. The fact that critics have only begun to realize this in the last twenty years, and that most general readers still do not recognize it, perhaps merely provides evidence of the tenacity with which even the most outmoded literary myths can retain their grip. However, in this case, we must suspect that the failure to acknowledge the full extent of Jane Austen's greatness is intimately linked with the unwillingness of both nineteenth and twentieth century readers to question the reality of an image which accorded so perfectly with their general view of women.

Jane Austen accepted the contemporary attitude to household management, in that she frequently stresses the link between the well-managed household and the healthy nation. We have already seen how Sir Walter Elliot's failure to hold on to his estate is indicative of the decline of the gentry, and it is significant in our present context that the degeneration of Kellynch began with the death of Lady Elliot who exercised "method, moderation, and economy, which had just kept him [Sir Walter] within his income." (Vol. V, p. 9)

However, Jane Austen's arguments for the significance of these functions acquires far more credibility than those of her contemporaries because, at the same time, she claims that women have the abilities necessary to fulfil them. If any women in her novels are less intelligent and rational than men it is because they have been subjected to an inferior education. Wherever her female characters have enjoyed a proper education they prove to be the equals of men. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, repeatedly outwits Darcy who is an extremely clever man; and Anne Elliot turns out to be much more rational, logical and decisive than any of her male companions during the crisis following Louisa Musgrove's accident. Rather than praising submission and timidity, Jane Austen advocates that women be assertive and active. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet wins far more credit when she ignores decorum and tramples across muddy fields to visit her sick sister Jane than does the young Fanny Price when she creeps timidly around Mansfield Park. Similarly, marriages are successful in Jane Austen's novels only when the woman assumes equal responsibility with the man, as is the case with Admiral and Mrs. Croft in Persuasion.

Persuasion provides evidence that Jane Austen only accepted the woman's restricted social role because she thought it satisfying. In a world where manners no longer serve a significant function we find Jane Austen's women beginning to intrude into masculine domains. Mrs. Croft, who argues fiercely for women to be considered "rational creatures" (Vol. V, p. 70) is the main example of this new type of woman. She is physically strong, and is described as possessing "vigour of form;"(Vol. V, p. 48) she accompanies her husband, the Admiral, on most of his voyages, and, when on land, rides recklessly around the countryside with him; and she readily joins in male conversations: "[Anne was] delighted to see the Admiral's hearty shake of the hand when he encountered an old friend, and observe their eagerness of conversation when occasionally forming into a little knot of the navy, Mrs. Croft looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her." (Vol. V, p. 168)

NOTES

1. "The Lesson of Balzac," in The House of Fiction, ed. Leon Edel (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), pp. 62-63.

2. James, p. 62.

3. James, p. 63.

4. "Gustav Flaubert," in The House of Fiction, p. 206.

5. "The Janeites," in Debits and Credits (New York: Scribners, 1926), p. 188. Subsequent references to "The Janeites" are cited in the text of my article.

6. Memoir of Jane Austen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 2. Subsequent references to Memoir are cited in the text of my article.

7. "Charlotte Bronte on Jane Austen, 1848, 1850," in Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 126.

8. R.W. Chapman, ed., Jane Austen's Letters (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 81. Subsequent references to Jane Austen's Letters are cited in the text of my article.

9. R.W. Chapman, ed., The Novels of Jane Austen (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), I,p.34. Subsequent references to The Novels of Jane Austen are cited in the text of my article. Volumes I-V were published in 1933, and volume VI in 1954.

10. Muriel Jaeger, Before Victoria (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 119.

11. "'A Pair of Fine Eyes': Jane Austen's Treatment of Sex," Studies in the Novel, 7 (Spring, 1975), pp. 88-103.

12. Chandler, p. 92.

13. Quoted from Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 135-136.

14. For a full discussion of the breadth of Jane Austen's concerns, see Donald Greene, "The Myth of Limitation," in Jane Austen Today, ed., Joel Weinsheimer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), pp. 142-75.

15. Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," in The Liberal Imagination, by Lionel Trilling (New York: Viking, 1955), pp. 211-12.

16. "First Letter of a Regicide Peace," in The Works of Edmund Burke (London: G. Bell, 1903-1910), V, p. 208.

17. For a full discussion of this topic, see David Monaghan, "The Decline of the Gentry: A Study of Jane Austen's Attitude to Formality in Persuasion," Studies in the Novel, 7 (Spring, 1975), pp.73-87.

18. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 264.

19. James Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women (London: Millar and Cadell, 1767), I, pp. 271-72 and I, pp. 201-02.

20. Legacy to His Daughters, in Angelica's Ladies Library or Parents and Guardians Present (London: S. Hamilton, 1794), p. 10.