

# ENGLAND'S JANE

G. C. HADDOW

*Jane lies in Winchester—blessed be her shade!  
Praise the Lord for making her, and her for all she made!  
And while the stones of Winchester, or Milsom Street, remain,  
Glory, love, and honour unto England's Jane!*

RUDYARD KIPLING

JANE AUSTEN'S place in English fiction is a curious one, and her genius of a nature to invite paradoxical comment. It would be easy to show either that she is typically English or that she is strikingly un-English. She is the greatest artist among our novelists, and also the smallest. Consequently she has been both over-praised and underrated.

## I

Someone has observed that in England more than in any other country the novel has been a vehicle of that sense of wonder which is the distinguishing mark of the great romantic movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whatever truth there may be in this observation, it does not apply to Jane Austen. Her early stories are close to the time of *Lyrical Ballads*, her later ones contemporary with the youthful poems of Byron and Shelley; yet, as A. C. Bradley says, she got nothing from the romantic movement "except the opportunity of making fun of Mrs. Radcliffe." She is untroubled by the mystery and complexity of life. She is blissfully unaware of "the riddle of the painful earth." Her reach never exceeds her grasp, and everything in human experience which suggests the infinite is beyond her comprehension. In the midst of a period restless, enquiring, and impassioned, Jane Austen stands apart in a tight little corner of her own, completely sheltered from the high winds of poetry; from Wordsworth's mystical love of nature, from Coleridge's wizard twilight, from Byron's stormy, discordant splendour, from Shelley's longing for the unattainable, from Keats's devout worship of beauty.

Thus untouched by the main currents of thought and feeling sweeping through literature, she is equally unaffected by the momentous political events of her time, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Hardly an echo of Europe's vast anguish and perturbation can be heard in her novels. The world of Jane Austen has been aptly compared to a small, comfortably

furnished drawing-room, with the windows closed and the blinds drawn, from which the noises and the disturbing sights of a harsh, fierce world are excluded. To read a book like *Emma* now is to find temporary refuge from stormy seas on an island of incredible order, peace, and security.

In order to appreciate and admire Jane Austen it is not necessary to disregard her limitations. One must agree substantially with Norman Collins, in his amusing book *The Facts of Fiction*, that "The boundaries of her mind are such that no more than a fragment of human experience the size of a hen-coop is enclosed." The staple ingredients of her work are small talk, gossip, and match-making among people whose lives are passed mainly in vacuity and idleness. Macaulay and others have compared her genius for characterization with Shakespeare's. The comparison, to which I shall return, is not wholly undeserved; but assuredly no less remarkable than the resemblance is the contrast between Jane Austen with her spinster's outlook on the parish—however keen and observant—and Shakespeare's "first-rate imagination working on a first-rate experience." "The hand which drew Miss Bates," writes Goldwin Smith, "though it could not have drawn Lady Macbeth, could have drawn Dame Quickly or the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*." To this it is sufficient to reply that Jane Austen could no more have drawn Juliet's nurse than she could have drawn the wife of Bath. The nurse, so to speak, knew the facts of life, and was unembarrassed by them. In reading Jane Austen one is inclined to wonder at times, "How do these beings, otherwise recognizably human, reproduce their kind?" And not only sexual passion but almost every sort of violent or agitating emotion is beyond her scope. Charlotte Brontë, in so many respects her antithesis, was not far wrong when she wrote, "She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood. Even to the feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition . . . too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and insensible (not *senseless*) woman." It may be granted that there is an element of over-statement here, and that the epithet *insensible* cannot fairly be applied to the author of *Persuasion*; but the passage provides a wholesome corrective to the adulation of those devout Janeites for whom

a word in disparagement of their idol is like speaking against Holy Writ.

The admirers of Jane Austen include men as eminent and as different as Sir Walter Scott, Coleridge, Macaulay, Disraeli, Tennyson and Kipling. Scott's characteristically generous praise is well known: "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big bow-wow strain I can do myself, like any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary, commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied me." Disraeli is said to have read *Pride and Prejudice* seventeen times. Macaulay places Jane Austen next to Shakespeare in the power to draw a wide variety of characters without simplification or caricature: "She has given us a multitude of characters, all in a certain sense commonplace, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings."

Macaulay, of course, has his "heightened and telling way" of saying things, by which only the unwary are likely to be taken in. The fact is that Jane Austen is essentially a writer of comedy, an inveterate laugher, and the limitations of her imaginative sympathy, together with a certain rigidity of moral outlook, have their effect not only on the range but on the depth and complexity of her characterization. There is ground for the comparison, however. Like Shakespeare, Jane Austen has no theoretical philosophy, but is intent on the development of her story, delighting whole-heartedly in creation for its own sake. Like Shakespeare also, she is fundamentally sympathetic towards human nature, while nevertheless preserving a degree of detachment which enables her to regard life steadily and with relative impartiality.

"I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can." These words of Elizabeth Bennett, an especial favourite of her creator, express perfectly the spirit that prevails almost everywhere in Jane Austen's work. It is the spirit of Molière and of George Meredith in *The Egoist*, the spirit of a critical observer who looks at life from the comic point of view. Though frequently accompanied by ironical comment, Jane Austen's portraiture is seldom in the proper sense satirical. Though she does not suffer fools gladly,

she has no desire either to reform or to condemn them. It is clear that she dislikes sentimentality and affectation; but it is equally clear that she finds their manifestations endlessly amusing, and the amusement thus afforded tempers the dislike and frees it from the bitterness of angry contempt or disgust. She can present people who in actual life would be intolerable in such a light as to render them far more delightfully ridiculous than offensive. We perceive clearly the difference between their pretensions and the actual facts, and because we enjoy so much the spectacle of their absurdity, we cannot seriously wish them harm. Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, is a snob, an ass, and a bore; but, like Mr. Bennet, we listen to his conversation "with the keenest enjoyment", and feel that Elizabeth was indeed honoured by the best proposal of its kind in all fiction, the supreme example of how not to do it.

Leading a quiet, obscure life within a narrow circle, and being perfectly aware of the limitations of her genius, Jane Austen was content to select her material from observed facts verified by personal experience. "Three or four families in a country village," she says, "is the very thing to work on". Her characters are taken from the middle classes or, to speak more exactly, from the provincial gentry. The nobility hardly come within her range, and though we hear of respectable tradesmen, we are not introduced to them. Of the Coleses in *Emma* we learn only that they were "very good sort of people, but of low origin, in trade and only moderately genteel". As for poor people, the tenantry and servants, they are not even in the background. Jane Austen, no doubt, was kind-hearted and good to the poor, but as a novelist she is not interested in them. Of the worship of rank or of social obsequiousness, however, she has not a trace. While she writes a great deal about the sense of family and social position, and even approves a modest measure of it as conducive to order and decorum, she ridicules aristocratic pride in Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Sir Walter Elliot. A snob to her is a snob in every state.

## II

Her completed novels, six in number, fall into two equal groups, early and late. The first three, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*, were written in her early twenties; the others, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, in her late thirties. *Sense and Sensibility*, the first

to be published, came out belatedly thirteen years after its composition, while *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* did not appear until after their author's death. She died at the age of forty-one, within a year of the completion of her last novel. Her work received public recognition only in her later years; and although the Prince Regent became an enthusiastic admirer, and her genius was appreciated by Scott and other discriminating readers, Jane Austen's fame has been mostly posthumous.

It has been said that Jane Austen shows no development in her art. Certainly *Pride and Prejudice*, written when she was twenty-two, displays astonishing maturity and assurance, and in some respects was never surpassed. It is true also that her style and method remain essentially the same from beginning to end, as does her view of life, society and character. The later novels, however, have a deeper seriousness of purpose, more variety and complexity of plot, and a finer analysis of motives, the last conspicuously in *Emma*, whose heroine is shown developing through experience. And more attention is given to environment and the outer world, the squalor of Portsmouth in *Mansfield Park*, the autumn landscapes of Lyme and Uppercross in *Persuasion*.

Most readers would probably agree that *Sense and Sensibility* is the weakest of the novels, and that *Northanger Abbey*, although clever and amusing, can hardly claim an outstanding place among them. *Sense and Sensibility* was written after the undoubtedly superior *Pride and Prejudice*, though it appears to have been based on an earlier draft called *Elinor and Marianne*. The plot is not handled with Jane Austen's usual deftness. It contains an element bordering on melodrama, with incidents that seem highly improbable because they are not prepared for. Moreover, the book has a didactic tone to which the author seldom returned. The contrast between the sisters, Elinor with her well-ordered sense and Marianne with her impulsive sensibility, is too obvious; and the lesson against undisciplined feeling and unreasoned love, though sound enough in its way, is too one-sided to win complete acceptance. There is plenty of entertainment in the story, however. The minor characters are well done, especially Mrs. Jennings with her good-natured vulgarity and "noisy cheerfulness"; and the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood, in which the wife reasons her husband out of keeping a promise to look after his step-mother and orphaned half-sisters, is admirable comedy of the driest vintage.

*Northanger Abbey* is in part a travesty of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe's novels of suspense and terror, which, at the time of its composition, were in the full tide of their popularity. The heroine of the story, Catherine Morland, expects to find the counterpart of her sensational reading in real life, spectre-haunted castles with gloomy passages and sliding panels, mysterious manuscripts hidden in secret drawers, concealed crimes, midnight assassins and the skeletons of their victims. While staying at Bath, she makes the acquaintance of a young clergyman named Henry Tilney and his sister Elinor, and is invited to visit their home, Northanger Abbey. Thrilled by the prospect, Catherine arrives on a stormy evening to find that her room contains a curious, old-fashioned black cabinet from which, after immense trouble, she extracts the expected mysterious manuscript. Just as she lays hands on it, her candle goes out. "Darkness impenetrable and immovable filled the room. A violent gust of wind rising with sudden fury added fresh horror to the moment . . . Human nature could support no more . . . Groping her way to the bed, she jumped hastily in and sought some suspension of agony by creeping far underneath the clothes." Next morning she discovers the manuscript to be a bundle of washing lists! The father of her friends, General Tilney, is a widower, and Catherine, from the little she has heard about the dead wife, now conceives a direful romance of crime. "The general's silent thoughtfulness, his downcast eyes and contracted brow" are sufficient to convict him of murder. Or perhaps, Catherine speculated, "Mrs. Tilney yet lives, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food". As it happens, the general, though guiltless of crime, turns out to be something of an ogre; for when he discovers that Catherine is not an heiress, fearing for his son, he packs her off home. The young man follows her, however, and offers his hand, the irate father is melted in a moment of good humour, and Catherine has gained both wisdom and happiness. The most light-hearted of the novels, *Northanger Abbey*, is largely farce without much attempt at serious characterization, though Catherine has no lack of personality. She is an engaging little goose, with her naivete and bubbling enthusiasm, and the horsy, loud-mouthed John Thorpe, swearing, bragging and lying to increase his self-importance, is a lively caricature who would be effective on the stage.

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To select the best among the remaining four novels is as difficult as to make choice among the four symphonies of Brahms.

Each has had its champions, and each has its own peculiar claim to be considered its author's finest work. The most popular is undoubtedly *Pride and Prejudice*, and, however much one may be inclined in general to distrust the wisdom and taste of majorities, it cannot be denied that *Pride and Prejudice* is a masterpiece. The most brilliant, the most boldly plotted, the most dramatic in dialogue and situation, the most continuously amusing, it exhibits more fully than any other of the novels the central characteristics of Jane Austen's art. It was her own favourite. She called it her darling child, and once wrote of its heroine, "I must confess I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print." Countless readers have delighted in Elizabeth Bennet. She is a sister of Shakespeare's Beatrice—with beauty enough, gaiety, wit, excellent sense, an independent mind and a high spirit. In short she has everything, and yet is never for a moment too good to be true. So many tributes have been paid to her charm and vivacity, her "mixture of sweetness and archness", that further praise would be superfluous.

Her *vis-a-vis*, Philip Darcy, is the most masterful of Jane Austen's lovers. His conceit, arrogance and rudeness are perhaps a little overdone in the early scenes of the story; but he is intended to have a disagreeable side, and it must be prominent enough to arouse Elizabeth's indignation and antipathy at the outset and to put a formidable obstacle in the way leading to their marriage. The process by which Darcy is humiliated and schooled, and by which the real strength and generosity of his nature are brought to light, is traced without vagueness or uncertainty; it is all made entirely credible. And though his pride is purified, Darcy retains an unduly high opinion of his personal and family consequence as a defect inseparable from his fine qualities. After their engagement, Elizabeth, on the point of making a joke at his expense, remembered just in time "that he had yet to learn to be laughed at". One may doubt whether he ever made much progress in this direction, even under Elizabeth's tutelage.

If there is any fault at all in the conduct of the story, it is the author's neglect to make it clear early enough that Elizabeth is attracted by Darcy in spite of her strong dislike of him. Even this, however, does not excuse the injustice done to Elizabeth by Sir Walter Scott in taking seriously her remark to her sister that she fell in love with Darcy when she first saw his beautiful

grounds at Pemberley. How Elizabeth would have enjoyed teasing Sir Walter!

No praise can be too high for the portraiture of Elizabeth's clever, sarcastic father, the superior man who so much enjoys laughing at his family until he is shocked out of philosophic detachment by the seduction of his youngest daughter, or for the surpassingly silly but affectionate Mrs. Bennet with her transports of delight in her daughter's marriages. But the greatest source of amusement in *Pride and Prejudice* is the Reverend Mr. Collins and his worshipful patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. To say that Mr. Collins is a caricature is not to disparage Jane Austen's art. Characters viewed from an aloof, intellectual standpoint, who are always figures of fun and with whom we are never permitted for a moment to sympathize, are necessarily caricatures. In other words, the traits which make them amusing are exaggerated and brought prominently before us. Mr. Collins, however, is no mere personification of abstract qualities or crudely fashioned mechanical puppet. He is alive in every gesture, every modulation of voice, every turn of phrase. In a sense he is a static figure who belongs to a timeless world, but in this world he shares the immortality of Micawber and the other great comic creations of Dickens.

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About *Mansfield Park*, the first of the later group of novels, there is a wide divergence of opinion. Some readers, including Tennyson, have given it the highest place; others consider it to be the weakest of the great four. For my own part, I should like to adapt A. C. Bradley's judgment on the place of *King Lear* among Shakespeare's plays, and say that *Mansfield Park* is Jane Austen's greatest achievement, but not her best novel. It is the most complex in subject-matter, the widest in scope, having a richer emotional quality than any other except *Persuasion*, and revealing glimpses of a world beyond the normally well-defined parish boundaries. And yet one is left with a feeling of misgiving about the working out of the story; the hand of the author in guiding events is too apparent, and in the drawing of two important characters there is some uncertainty and distortion.

*Mansfield Park* tells the story of Fanny Price, a shy little girl who is kept for charity by wealthy and imposing relations. In the grandeur of their mansion she is snubbed by everyone except her cousin Edmund Bertram, a young man in holy orders



whom she adores, and whom, after years of secret and apparently hopeless devotion, she eventually marries. That Jane Austen liked and intended her readers to like this Cinderella heroine cannot be doubted, but Fanny's excessive modesty and humility are fitted at times to exasperate a present-day reader. Compared with the spirited Elizabeth Bennet, she is nothing more nor less than a doormat. She meekly accepts the most unreasonable and exacting demands of "her betters", has an almost servile gratitude for her lowly position in their household, and submits without a murmur to the atrocious bullying of her Aunt Norris. When she is invited to dine at the rectory, Mrs. Norris admonishes her on humility. Fanny takes it lying down, and one wishes that Elizabeth Bennet could step into the pages of *Mansfield Park* to put Mrs. Norris in her place.

There is something to be said on Fanny's behalf, however. Her situation is a pathetic one, and her upbringing not of a kind to foster independence and self-confidence. If too self-effacing to arouse more than a mild interest in her fate, she at least wins esteem for her intelligence, sincerity, and genuine goodness of heart. When troubles come to the Bertram family, it is Fanny to whom they turn for comfort and support.

More attractive, if less estimable, than Fanny is Mary Crawford, who with her brother Henry comes as a visitor to the rectory. Mary is a siren, graceful, witty and accomplished, with a worldly disposition and standards, but amiable and not unkind. She fascinates Edmund Bertram, although he is shocked by her levity and her disparagement of the clerical profession as one which no man of spirit would enter. In the end the charm is broken, and Edmund's eyes are opened to what he calls Mary's "faults of principle . . . of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind". The revelation comes a shock not only to Edmund but also to the reader. In the latter part of the book Mary displays a callousness and cynicism for which one is unprepared, and in which it is difficult to believe. One feels that Jane Austen is too hard on her, that she is blackening Mary's character in order to make her an illustration of the evil of having no principles.

The same fault is shown in the characterization of her brother. Henry Crawford is the most complex and in some respects the most interesting man whom Jane Austen has drawn. But he has not been fully thought out; the motive of his actions is uncertain, and the portrait as a whole is blurred, unsteady. Like his sister, Henry is vivacious, worldly and pleasure-loving.

He carries on a flirtation with the two Bertram girls, showing a preference for Maria, the elder, who is already engaged to be married. As Mary puts it, he likes "to make girls a little in love with him"; so naturally enough he tries to make an impression on Fanny as well. In spite of his lack of scruple, Henry has good sense and moral taste. He falls deeply in love with Fanny and proposes to her. Fanny, knowing his reputation, cannot believe in his sincerity; but Henry perseveres and is backed in his suit by Sir Thomas Bertram and even by Edmund, whose regard for Fanny is that of an affectionate brother. In the course of time, although Fanny keeps rejecting him, Henry's consideration for her feelings and his gentle persistence begin to make their influence felt. We are told in the last chapter of the book that had he deserved more, more would have been obtained, that eventually "Fanny must have been his reward and a reward very voluntarily bestowed". All this, though somewhat surprising, is not incredible. What is, if not incredible at least insufficiently explained, is Henry's elopement with Maria, now Mrs. Rushworth, just when he is making headway with Fanny. "He was entangled by his own vanity," says Jane Austen, "with as little excuse of love as possible." But Henry is not an inexperienced boy, and he is anything but a fool. It does not seem likely that he would have been rushed by a married woman into a scandal which was certain to ruin his happiness. The real reason for the elopement is that the way must be cleared for Fanny to marry Edmund. With villainy unmasked, faithful love at last has its reward. "I entreat everybody", writes the author unashamed, "to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund ceased to care about Miss Crawford and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire." We believe, perhaps with some slight reservation about Edmund's feelings; but we should not have to be entreated.

Among the subordinate characters of *Mansfield Park* is one of Jane Austen's most superb creations, Mrs. Norris. She is an odious woman, always "in a bustle without having anything to bustle about", managing, interfering and making arrangements for other people without taking any responsibility on herself or really consulting their happiness. Yet whether she is laying down the law or badgering poor Fanny or doing good works at the expense of others, Mrs. Norris is a perpetual source of delight. She is so completely alive, such a superlative example

of her kind. Moreover she is not in the least a caricature. In this mean, spiteful, domineering woman there is a vein of strong affection. When Maria Rushworth has been divorced by her husband and cast off by her father, Mrs. Norris makes a home for her and devotes herself to caring for the unfortunate girl whose character she had helped to spoil.

Another feature of the novel that deserves notice is the episode of Fanny's visit to her family at Portsmouth. In describing the squalid household, the harassed, inefficient mother and the unruly children, Jane Austen ventures into unfamiliar territory; and while she does not go far or stay long, the excursion is a complete success. So vivid indeed is the realism of these scenes that Goldwin Smith rashly compares her with Zola. A juster comparison is afforded by George Gissing.

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With *Emma* we return to pure comedy and a simpler story. Whereas in *Mansfield Park* the interest is considerably diffused, in *Emma* it is focussed on a central character. The theme of the book is the moral education of its heroine. This "sturdy young patrician", as she has been called, has faults enough and to spare. "I am going to take a heroine," said her creator, "whom nobody but myself will much like." The reason why one has to acquire a liking for Emma Woodhouse is that although conceived in affection and respect, she is unsparingly exposed in the light of the comic spirit. Jane Austen's attitude towards her is at once sympathetic and detached. At bottom Emma is a good sort with an honest mind and a generous disposition; but having been allowed her own way too much as a child, she has to learn by experience that she is not so important and wise as she thinks she is. The comedy lies in the contrast between her own confidence of being always in the right and the fact that she is always wrong. When we first make her acquaintance, she is a wilful, conceited girl who fancies that she can see into the minds of others and is therefore competent to manage their lives for them. Her particular interest is in match-making; and it is only after a long series of errors, which threaten to destroy not only the happiness of her friends but ultimately her own as well, that she is brought to realize her folly and to see people as they really are. Having laughed at Emma throughout most of the novel, in the end we come to respect her because she is capable of learning her lesson and of acknowledging and regretting her mistakes.

Although Emma herself is always in the centre of the picture, a secondary interest is provided by the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. This sub-plot, as it may fairly be called, furnishes one of the means by which the great Miss Woodhouse is humbled, and thus contributes to the working out of the main theme. Jane Fairfax is never allowed to compete with Emma for our attention, but I cannot agree with the widely held opinion that she is vague and uninteresting. While drawn in rather dim tones and seen, as it were, at a distance, she is given a peculiar charm which makes her the most romantic of all Jane Austen's young women. She is unhappy, she is demure and reserved, she is elegant and accomplished. Her talent for music gives her distinction among people who have no real interest in any of the arts. And not the least of her attractions is her beautiful name.

The other characters include two great comic successes, Emma's father and the talkative old maid, Miss Bates. Mr. Woodhouse is slightly overdrawn, but he is as memorable in his way as Mr. Collins. A. C. Bradley calls him, "next to Don Quixote the most perfect gentleman in literature." It would be nearer the mark to say that he is the most perfect old woman. His chief interests in life are weak gruel and keeping out of draughts. He is in a continual state of alarm about open doors, damp weather, and dangerous corners. Frank Churchill's heedless preparations for a ball stirred him to protest: "That young man . . . is very thoughtless. Do not tell his father, but that young man is not quite the thing. He has been opening doors very often this evening, and keeping them open very inconsiderately. He does not think of the draught. I do not mean to set you against him, but indeed he is not quite the thing." Everybody, including Jane Austen, pampers and coddles Mr. Woodhouse. He is supremely ridiculous, but the sweetness of his disposition, his perfect courtesy and benevolent intentions are rewarded by an indulgence which on occasion one feels to be beyond his deserts. When Mrs. Goddard and Mrs. Bates come to spend the evening with him, a fine supper of sweetbreads and asparagus is provided for the two old ladies—a treat for them because they are not too well fed at home, and Mrs. Bates happens to be particularly fond of sweetbreads. But Mr. Woodhouse pronounces the dish to be underdone, and has it replaced by baked apples and biscuits. His vigilant concern for the digestion of his friends is never relaxed for an instant. "He loved to have the cloth laid, because it had been the custom of

his youth; but his conviction of suppers being very unwholesome made him rather sorry to see anything put upon it, and while his hospitality would have welcomed his visitors to everything, his care for their health made him grieve that they should eat."

The only trouble with Miss Bates is that she sometimes becomes a bore in the book, as she would be all the time in real life. Contented with little, cheerful and warm-hearted, she is a sister, under her respectable skin, of the disreputable Mrs. Jupp in *The Way of All Flesh*. She has the same voluble tongue, the same utter inability to say anything briefly and to stick to the point. Emma gives Miss Bates less than her due when she says, "What is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her"; for her effusive speech is part of her overflowing kindness. There is a little too much of Miss Bates however. She is a worthy creature; her "trivial communications and harmless gossip" are, up to a point, both amusing and endearing. But they are very, very long.

*Emma* is perhaps the ripest, the kindest, the most perfectly balanced of the novels. While less witty and high-spirited than *Pride and Prejudice*, it competes with the earlier work for first place. My own preference for *Pride and Prejudice* may be due to the fact that I like Elizabeth Bennet better than Emma Woodhouse.

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For *Persuasion* I cannot care as much as some people do, on account of its lack of humor. With the possible exception of Sir Walter Elliot, there is not a first-rate comic character in the book, and even Sir Walter is hardly more than a sharp satirical sketch. As for his youngest daughter, Mary Musgrove, with her blatant snobbery, her ceaseless complaints and fancied ailments, she is for the most part simply disagreeable. Instead of laughter she arouses feelings of irritation and contempt. Curiously enough *Persuasion*, the most personal and poetic of the novels, is also the harshest. The characters whom the author likes are treated with a peculiar tenderness, and those whom she dislikes with a new note of disdain. Comedy has hardened into satire. There is nothing in Jane Austen more unfeeling than her remark about the elder Mrs. Musgrove's "large, fat sighings over the destiny of a son whom, alive, nobody had cared for".

The other side of *Persuasion* is its love story, told with deep emotion and genuine pathos. At the beginning Anne Elliot is still a young woman, but she has lost her bloom and much of her vitality. Seven years before this time, under mistaken advice, she

had rejected the man she loved. He returns to the scene, and after misunderstandings and difficulties the lovers are reunited. The theme of disappointment in love and constancy in disappointment is treated with such restrained intensity as to suggest at least a strain of personal experience, although in regard to the possibility of Jane Austen's having had an unhappy love affair there is nothing to go on but vague tradition and conjecture. In the following passage, however, we seem to hear the author speaking not only for her sex but for herself: "Oh," cried Anne eagerly to Captain Harville, "I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by women. No, I believe that you are capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion and to every domestic forbearance so long as—if I may be allowed the expression—so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest when existence or when hope is gone."

The fact that in *Persuasion* Jane Austen reveals herself more clearly than elsewhere has made this novel the favourite of many admirers. But it is an uneven book; it lacks the harmony of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*. We are told that the author was dissatisfied with it as a whole and, it seems to me, not without reason, for in spite of its peculiar beauty of atmosphere and unique touch of subdued melancholy *Persuasion* has more than a few stretches that are weary and dull.

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In conclusion, it may be said that the novels of Jane Austen afford an excellent example of just beauties in small proportions. Their author knew exactly what she was aiming at. She did not draw a mighty bow, but she hit the mark with precision. Her own words about "the little bit of ivory (two inches wide) on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour" suggests the true nature of her art. She is an unequalled miniaturist. The effect may be small, but it is bright and lasting, and the labour has not been wasted or misdirected.

# IMPRESSIONS OF THE CHINESE

DIANA SKALA

WE decided to visit the Chinese theatre—two of us being confirmed sinophiles; my friend, out of sheer principle—the Chinese being our allies; myself, out of a predisposed love of the Chinese arts, philosophy and people. Our two other companions, indifferent with regard to China, and sceptical of what Toronto could offer, were willing to accompany us anywhere they had not been before.

So on Sunday afternoon we arrived at a glittering little downtown theatre, to meet and to fraternize at a performance of the traditional Chinese play.

The young man who ushered us through the hall had a round face, almond eyes, yellow skin—a Chinese presumably. But, as soon as he started speaking, we saw that these physical features were but the shell of his race, a Chinese mask. Beneath it he was just a young man of the middle class you might meet in any white family in the city, with the same prosaic and matter-of-fact intelligence.

We promenaded down the hall to our seats, and in spite of our reason and our democratic hearts we could not prevent a deep-seated prejudice from making us aware that we were a little group of four whites swamped in a sea of Chinese faces, alien faces. We sat down, and I turned "bravely" to meet my environment. Everywhere bright eyes seemed to gaze at us curiously. In some I thought I read a malignant design, and I shrank within myself with a thrill of fear; others were utterly inscrutable. A couple of little children ran down the aisle, and the whole audience turned with affectionate interest and smiled down on them. It was a strange fascination to see the imprint of the mystery and the age-old lore of an ancient race mirrored in the clear depths of these children's faces. My friend whispered at my side: "If I see a good-looking Chinaman, I am going to marry him and have Chinese children ever after." I looked again at the people, and it seemed to me as if now I really saw them. They were mostly peasants. No doubt here they managed laundries, but in their native land they were the kinsfolk of the sod. They carried its marks upon their souls—warm-hearted and kind but stupid faces. Here and there a face held you by its profound intelligence and dignified though sombre beauty. There was a quality in it as of something eternal, a feeling you might get when gazing at the pyramids and the sphinx. You

will see a kindred look among Jewish faces. It is the sadness of a people that has built its home in exile and that is made to feel always that it is an alien and an undesirable intruder. And beneath it all, perhaps enhancing that look, the languor and fatigue of life that is present in every old race with the exception of the Hindoo.

We waited for the play to start. A Chinaman came forward on the stage and made a speech in Chinese. I think it must have been a delightful speech. I know I enjoyed it. I said as much to my friends, who were quite bored by the sounds of a language that for them held no meaning.

"You understand Chinese?" they exclaimed, incredulous.

"I don't. But I think I understand that man. Through his way of speaking you can discern the Chinese philosophy of etiquette. Their rule for good manners is evidently that one must be humble, unostentatious, not smile at one's own jokes, be very simple and restrained in one's speech. I think he was a charming speaker. I am very sorry I did not understand what he was saying."

At that moment there came a scraping and screeching and mewing from the Chinese orchestra on the stage. We thought they were tuning up. But when the play commenced and the "tuning up" continued, we understood to our dismay that it was music to accompany the performance.

"If they would only keep from playing their music, one could really begin to enjoy their theatre," my friend complained. After half an hour of this, he could stand it no longer, and assuring us that half an hour of Chinese theatre will last him for the rest of his life, walked out under the astonished and smiling gaze of the audience, who were quite amused at his lack of understanding, for the best part of the play was just beginning. We sat stoically, bent on seeing the thing through. As soon as the gongs came on, I at any rate derived joy from the music. One, two, three gongs. The golden mellow sounds with their rich dark overtones filled the tawdry hall, and it seemed as if the walls had melted away and we were in some ancient temple awaiting the performance of a mystic ritual. Their acting, too, was so hieratic, not the faintest indication of a smile except where it was recognized as most proper and befitting. I felt that the stage was some altar on which were enacted the secret rites of a people, a race. No doubt that is the actor's way in every nation, to be the guardian of its traditions and culture, it being inherent in the very nature of his work to preserve that which serves as the



medium of interpretation and sympathy with his audience. In truth a priestly task it seems, and nowhere more marked than in the Chinese theatre, yet strangely enough the actor is (though less now than formerly) a despised being in China, socially an outcast, and no one would boast of his association in any way with actors whether as artist or writer for the stage. Though many important officials and even a princess indulged in the art of play-writing, this was treated as a kind of unsavoury escapade, which was not to be mentioned in polite society for fear of giving offence.

It is the custom in China for a host to entertain his guests with the performance of plays, but if in choice of these for the evening's entertainment there should be one on the list written by a guest of his who was to be present, he would be careful to exclude it from the repertoire. No insult must be offered the guest by hinting that he had anything to do with actors or the theatre.

We sat watching the play. Their manner of adjusting the scenery right on the stage and during the performance has in it a quality of ultrasophisticated charm. The villain was supposed to enter through the window. The dainty curtained window supported on three legs was placed in position, the villain crawled through and the window was taken away. All in full view of the audience! The Chinese find this quite natural evidently, and the reactions of westerners are varied. My friends thought it "rather crude." But the principals who participate in this play seem to bring to it a certain solemnity and at the same time an aloof humour and awareness, so that I would hesitate to apply any such epithet. I thought this make-believe captivating.

There were picturesque dances, really a set of postures, but each pose does not go into frozen rest and into "death." They have a fascinating way of letting each movement hang upon air. One has the impression of life and meaning and energy going on to completion, but instead of completing itself and so ending itself, each movement passes in to the next that follows naturally, yet is still a suspense and not a completion. And this again is split into another and another. The little songs to the accompaniment of the orchestra, which to our western ears seem of slight melodic variety and monotonously repeated over and over again, were not at all unpleasant, and after a while by their continuous intonation you were as if charmed into their world of emotion and plot which they were attempting to picture.

After my initial introduction to the Chinese theatre, I found I had contracted a strange new habit. I felt I must go to

see a performance every two weeks, no oftener, but as regularly as that. These performances are held every other week Sunday afternoons, and also many times in the middle of the week. Not always were these in the hired theatre where I had seen the first Chinese play. Some were in a small place on Elizabeth Street, the heart of Toronto Chinatown—a name used in the not so distant past as a bogey to frighten little children. The entrance was next to a grocery store where, amid strings of onions hanging from the ceiling and weird-shaped roots preserved in jars along the shelves, Chinamen argue seriously the wisdom of Chiang Kai Shek's latest move. To reach the "theatre", we had to climb up dimly lit, narrow, rickety, and terrifically winding stairs. Quite a thrill for anyone who does *not* indulge in the dime novels of Chinatown, thank you. It was a perfect setting for a murder, oriental or otherwise. At last we reached the top of the stairs. We passed behind a heavy door and inside. Here the stage was on a level with the audience, and it gave a sense of informality which was quite enchanting. It was a low-ceiling, smoky, fair-sized room, with an iron stove on the right near the stage. There were men in overalls, in their work-clothes. From our seats we saw some of them come in with a deliciously naive joy on their faces, like children eager for an expected pleasure. Each little group as it came in, in twos and threes, greeted and was greeted by their comrades with wreathed smiles, and a cascade of liquid and sharp bird-sounds would flow and scatter across the room. They seemed to find many things humorous which delighted them enormously, for they laughed as if they were enjoying themselves. So did I, listening to them, for I can't remember where or how long ago it was that I heard such simple and glad laughter.

The play I found exceptionally entertaining. I thought it much more charming than the one they had put on in the hired theatre. It seemed to partake more of the delicate and alluring reserve or shyness present in their drawings and paintings. The music too, now, was not at all jarring, and the songs really very pleasant and interesting. I am quite sure it was not just the getting used to it, as someone suggested. This Chinese music was really very enjoyable. The instruments used may have had something to do with it. The ch'in, the Chinese' reputedly sweetest instrument, was most in prominence. They employ various other instruments in their orchestra, some of them quite incomprehensible to westerners, who marvel how any human ear could stand them, let alone find pleasure in them. But the

Chinese love their music, and have written much poetry about their favourite musical instruments. The famous court musician Konei speaks of the power of the hanging stone gong:

When I smite my musical stone  
Be it gently or strong,  
Then do the fiercest hearts leap for joy  
And the chiefs do agree among themselves.

There is an anecdote of Confucius who was visited by a man whose company he disliked. He told the servant to inform the man that he was out. But while the visitor was still within hearing, "Confucius took up his musical instrument and played very sweetly", to let the man know that he was in and permit him to understand the real reason for his non-admittance. A gesture worthy of the proverbially wise old East.

We saw few Chinese women at the performances, and none at all here. The performers as usual were all men, but some of them made attractive women, bewitching ones at any rate. The tapestries on the stage were beautiful in their colouring. We would have loved to carry some of them off with us, together with the gongs, one of the Chinamen who played in the orchestra (what a model he would have made, done in shining bronze! A Chinese Apollo. You can keep your Greek ones) and the actor who played the "Son".

This last young man looked so very learned, the opening of his arms wide, his hand on his hip; or turned with his back to the audience, his finger on his forehead. The gestures, the expressions were most noble; even when he suddenly opened his mouth wide in a grimace, you felt it was the most correct thing to do, the most proper, poised and right action befitting a man of the highest ideals and rank.

The actions were conventional, evidently stereotyped, and yet there was a grace and ease about them that was quite beautiful and admirable. It gave us a picture of China and the race—a very human people. And at its highest a race of poise, of wise and ancient culture, as represented in the best of their traditions and arts:

When you make to resound the stone melodiou  
When you touch the lyre that is called ch'in  
Then do the ghosts of the ancestors come to hear.