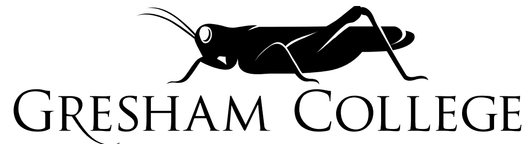

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Jane Austen: Patriotism and Prejudice

Professor Janet Todd

Jane Austen is global, bankable, and desirable. Possibly the only topic in our long 18th century period on which a scholar can write work that will definitely be reviewed, printed in thousands and sold in bookshops. Indeed, with a little media help, Austen's mega-celebrity status, what Adorno calls her 'ideological magic', can cause temporary celebrity even in critics. We have moved from making a case for her value—to doubt her supremacy now would be equivalent to admitting a vote for Brexit in Cambridge or Trump in Cambridge Mass.—to making more and more specific cultural contexts. Inevitably these fit with the political, social and personal orientation of the critic and her times.

Earlier this year Jane Austen arrived on the £10 note. A woman was needed to replace Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale, the do-gooders no longer in fashion, and who more popular than a bestseller whose most famous book *Pride and Prejudice* sold over 20 million copies—often with covers from even more popular films? But a woman doesn't get a banknote simply by being a romantic bestseller or Barbara Cartland would be there; Austen suits as the writer most concerned with precise amounts of money. The poet W.H. Auden was shocked to find

> An English spinster of the middle-class
> Describe the amorous effects of 'brass',
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society.

So it is right that Jane Austen becomes a banknote and that her brand means money. But that is still not enough, despite the coincidence that £10 is the amount she was paid for the first sale of a novel, later *Northanger Abbey*. Walter Scott achieved his banknote as the image of cultural Scottishness. Re-invented Jane Austen, prettified from her sister's grumpy portrait into frills and amiability—note the one for this talk-- accompanied by a great house never hers and a quotation from the mouth of a disagreeable character, is on the banknote also because of her essential Englishness. In these years of political and imperial decline, of embarrassment over a once boasted history, she provides a past we're allowed to be proud of and enjoy—as well as a commodity we can still sell abroad. In his obituary piece of 1917 written in the First World War, Reginald Farrer wrote that Austen makes 'us a new kingdom of refuge from the toils and frets of life'. In Kipling's short story 'Janeites', she's a talisman in time of national danger, her novels allowing passwords across disparate homosocial men in an otherwise divided kingdom. In the Second World War, Winston Churchill found comfort in the calm, mannered, very English space of Jane Austen: she stood for what foreigners menaced--old English values, parochial and paternalistic. We don't now have a world war but, in trying times of demotic modernity, she can still represent the imagined English world. *Pride and Prejudice*, the *book* on which her global fame rests, when translated into gorgeous images, becomes part of Heritage. The opulent, harmonious cinematic world opening so many Austen films delivers the 'green and pleasant land' of nostalgic pastoralism, even if much of the original action was indoors.

The Englishness depends on the figure of Jane Austen herself, constantly renewed by the Austen industry, shops, enactments, museums, spinoffs, media and fandom. The pretty icon of the only author loved as a person, is instantly recognisable in silhouette or detail. It presides over women's work in the nicest, most post-feminist way. No other writer has, I think, been so transposed into little things. Whole books are written about stuff she touched—and we are allowed to touch in replica in houses now devoted to her image--the material and frocks she wore and might copy, the embroidery and quilting we might admire and emulate, the recipes and cooking she might have done—though her letters suggest she was not a devotee of house-keeping. She found composition impossible with a 'head full of joints of mutton and doses of rhubarb'. The domestic romanticism is intensely English, as are the Austen enactments: the tours of gentle countryside, the staging of balls and afternoon teas—with china teacups and sponge cakes for sale online afterwards. As the quaint exempla of a nostalgic rural world for modern popular culture, her comfortable vision and person are as saleable for touristic purposes as the aristocratic houses that hosted the filmic versions of her essentially gentry—or middle sort--novels. On Radio 4, a lady from South America recently described visiting Chawton so as to feel like *being* Jane.

James Edward Austen Leigh caught the upsurge of interest in his aunt and, as an elderly Tory cleric in 1869, he boosted her fame by portraying her not as the professional writer of the Regency and supreme stylist modern criticism now sees, but as the cosy village spinster, the rector's prim, modest and contented daughter, as skilled with needlework and spillikins as with her quill, happy as a lark flying nowhere and seeing nothing of politics, empire or money, despite passing references to slavery and Antigua. 30 years later, Austen's England, became the lush pictorial southern counties through the work of Constance and Ellen Hill, later re-formed as cinematic Austen-lotus-land.

The question is: do the novels support these images so useful for heritage and nostalgia? To answer that we must start with the period when Austen rather than her Victorian nephew was writing.

She came to intellectual maturity in the 1790s when what we might now call internationalism was pitted against localism and insular pride. Mary Wollstonecraft and Tom Paine for example saw themselves as enlightened citizens of the world. They despised provincials who put Edmund Burke's little platoon of family and local community at the base of national thinking, approving instead a pan European ideal which spread to America and which, with various hitches and false starts, heralded a progressive, ineluctable future. But, as with the EU referendum of 2016, the enlightened or liberal classes were surprised and saddened to find all the world had not moved with them and, as war with France hardened national identities, the old atavistic connections of soil and race were reasserted, and unlike in the 18th century, the new nationalism was based on 'the people'.

Jane Austen was born after Wollstonecraft and Paine. She had a more securely genteel background. Her period of publishing, the 1810s, was very different from the 1790s: by then few men, let alone women, openly expressed the internationalist, deracinated opinions of the 1790s. If they did, they were vilified by a war-weary nation awash with king-and-country propaganda. Caution and perhaps subterfuge had become the mode in a way unnecessary in the earlier period when Paine wrote *The Rights of Man* and Wollstonecraft her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Many fell silent; the needy novelist Charlotte Smith moderated her radicalism and Wollstonecraft's radical friend Mary Hays turned to coffee-table books on famous queens.

Jane Austen had no first-hand experience of a foreign country. Apart from a few years in lodgings in the South and West of England and visits to London, the South coast and Kent, she lived solely with her family in two modest houses in Hampshire. She famously declared her subject '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' and was so concerned for local accuracy, she inquired about hedgerows in Northamptonshire. In his *Treatise of Human Nature,* the Scottish philosopher David Hume noted English parochialism, its gentlemen devoted to 'domestic affairs' and everyday objects. 19th century English fiction routinely withdrew from the moral vacuity of international capital cities like London and especially Paris; even by the end of the 18th century it was locating content in small provincial cultural identities. We should not then be surprised to find Austen being cautiously parochial and conservative. Her times and experience encouraged it.

Yet, her books don't quite seem the products of your average Anglican Tory lady, if one exists, or indeed of the modest spinster of Chawton cottage created by James Edward. The suspicion has led to many ingenious theories of *romans a clef* and shadow stories, some outrageous but all disturbing just a little the processed Jane Austen of popular culture, perhaps reconciling her more with her sister's sardonic than her nephew's sweet portrait.

I will investigate the unease using two works. The first is *Emma*, that utopian masterpiece of the English Austen that truly stays with 3 or 4 village families and doesn't move the self-satisfied heroine beyond a few miles from home. The second is the last unfinished work, *Sanditon*, where home and village have been abandoned for a seaside resort, whose name suggests its nature.

Emma like *Mansfield Park,* is almost Wordsworthian in its insistence on moments of unmetropolitan contentment through looking. The heroine waits for her friend at the door of Ford's shop in Highbury village, seeing:

> Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer.

The critic Ian Duncan commented that here real poverty is relegated to the word curs—Irish and Scottish writers of the time would have made poverty clearly part of the national vision. But Highbury is in the Home Counties, close to London, influenced by its prosperity and modernity while saved from its post-war depression and social unrest. Village and great house are not feudally connected as in early 18th century novels or in Celtic lands, but are interdependent. The circulation of goods and services—the hind quarters of pork, apples, potions and use of carriages --is sometimes patronising, but also uniting; commerce and inherited wealth, so often at odds in Austen's contemporaries, are moving together--though the heroine fails to see it. Society is still hierarchical but moderately transformable. When Emma looks aesthetically, she makes a satisfying whole of her dull village. So far so good.

The next time she makes something of 'nothing' occurs at Donwell Abbey, the house of the hero Mr Knightley. Emma looks with pride at the man with his ancient lineage, and unencumbered estate, seeing unostentatious house and land as pleasing, as –quintessentially England.

> she viewed the respectable size and style of the building, its suitable, becoming, characteristic situation, low and sheltered; its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight -- and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up. …The house …was just what it ought to be, and it looked what it was.

She strays further to:

> ... a broad short avenue of limes, which stretching beyond the garden at an equal distance from the river, seemed the finish of the pleasure grounds. It led to nothing; nothing but a view at the end over a low stone wall with high pillars, which seemed intended, in their erection, to give the appearance of an approach to the house, which never had been there….

Now alone, Emma looks further: at 'Abbey-Mill Farm, with meadows in front, and the river making a close and handsome curve around it':

> It was a sweet view -- sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.

Again here *'nothing'* is emphasised, so different from the famous 'something' of being mistress of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, about ownership and fullness. The *nothing* comprehends moderation, ease, balance and pragmatism. The contemplated grounds are not formal and abstract, far from French theory, not planned as improvers of land, people or states might wish, lacking straightened paths and contrivances. Again no poor disfigure the view –but nor are they arranged picturesquely for wealthier eyes. Here no mention is made of the land's fertility, so important to a farmer, or of footpaths epitomising the *people's* countryside in an increasingly industrial age. What do we think?

If we accept it as face value, and let the vision feed our urban habit of idealising rural life while ignoring its cruelties, are we under-reading? If we question it and refuse to see it as forerunner of Rupert Brooke's gentle country 'under an English heaven' are we over-reading? Is there something about the word 'English' in a pastoral context that tugs at the sentimental heart of modern Austen readers? Is Emma commodifying this meadowland as much as modern ramblers do other people's fields? Her own house of Hartfield is not primarily a farm: her family money doesn't rest on agriculture. She can afford an aesthetic vision because someone else has taken care of the capitalist underpinnings: she and her father are unaffected by falling prices and labour unrest, fearing only local thieves and gypsies.

To step back. Who owns the warm words? Is this the author speaking or ventriloquising Emma? Although delivered almost in the complete sentences of ordered self-investigation, I think they *are* Emma's thoughts caught in free indirect speech. In which case, since Emma has been so often wrong in her always backward-looking gaze, might we question the vision?

Much to be said on both sides. In a book in which George Knightley of England, living in an abbey appropriated to England and Protestantism from Roman origins, will defeat a man called Francis for possession of Emma—though of course ironically we learn Frank never actually wanted Emma –we must certainly rout for England. (Family tradition claimed Mr Knightley Jane Austen's favourite hero.) Of her male leads, he is the most identifiably 'English'. Dissociating himself from French words and manners, he greets his loved brother without the physical effusiveness associated with Continentals. His opponent Frank uses French phrases and, looking at foreign views, remarks 'I shall never be easy till I have seen some of these places'—a contrast to Emma's satisfaction with English nothing. He declares 'I am tired of doing nothing. I want a change. - I am sick of England, and would leave it to-morrow, if I could.' To this Emma, with sceptical reason, remarks: 'You are sick of prosperity and indulgence.' English prosperity.

Some of Austen's extant letters seem to support this English nationalism. To her sailor brother Francis she wrote 'It must be real enjoyment to you, since you are obliged to leave England, to be where you are, seeing something of a new Country, & one that has been so distinguished as Sweden.-You must have great pleasure in it.' She continues, 'I have a great respect for former Sweden.... I have always fancied it more like England than many Countries'. Austen adapts her letters to recipients and seemed a little in awe of Francis, her most patriotic brother; yet here England *is* the standard of other nations.

To return to *Emma* and the other hand. Many years ago, before Austen was radicalised into 21st century political correctness, the American critic Lionel Trilling caught the uneasiness in what looks at first glance like sincere patriotism: 'This England, especially as it is represented in *Emma*, is an idyll. The error of identifying it with the actual England ought always to be remarked. Yet the same sense of actuality that corrects the error should not fail to recognize the remarkable force of the ideal that leads many to make the error.'

There are reasons for unease. Abbey-Mill Farm, so satisfying to the eye, houses the worthy tenant farmer Robert Martin, whom Emma wrongly regards as socially below her illegitimate friend Harriet. Perhaps too that lukewarm sun makes a self-congratulatory imperial point about conquered lesser lands—without Emma being

aware. For what does she know? 'I lived out of the world' said her sickly father. He has kept his healthy daughter out of it too.

Jane Austen is an ironist, never easy to catch –as one might a combative satirist--in the act of mockery. She may seem equally to condemn and endorse. The radical essayist, William Hazlitt, with whom Austen has seemingly so little in common, found disinterestedness the central English (albeit Dissenting) virtue. In Austen, disinterested irony may work aesthetically to allow something restless even in an ideal so apparently endorsed. Here she differs from those 1790s thinkers, Wollstonecraft and Paine, who, beneath all, held to truth and clarity. Austen wrote, 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken.' Everyone's thought processes and ideals are fallible in this most equivocal of novels. Mr Knightley preaches truth-saying to his future wife even as she hides from him the truth of what she'd been believing. He too, like Emma and everyone else, has a propensity to deceive and think a little too well of himself. The problem is, as some would have it, that he loved a girl of 13 who happened to have £30,000 to bring to a needy estate, but that his self-confidence prevents change. This we can see from an unexpected quarter: the newcomer, the much mocked vulgar Mrs Elton from central Bristol.

Emma had tried to change Mr Knightley in the direction of more seigneurial behaviour—travelling by carriage rather than on foot: Mrs Elton pulls from the opposite direction. He had invited people to eat his strawberries in traditional manner. Mrs Elton tries to turn the rigid Donwell entertainment into a modern country fete, a middle class appropriation. Rather like touristic Box Hill. To embody her idea she needs some props, including a donkey. When Austen lived with her mother, sister and friend in Chawton cottage they could afford only a donkey cart for transport. One day surely someone will donate a donkey to Chawton—in the interest of Austen retro re-enactment. In which case it would resemble Mrs Elton's donkey, making part of a modern leisure industry. But the old stick-in-the-mud Mr Knightley will have none of this. Perhaps it's a little too close to the *fete champetre* of the recently beheaded Marie Antoinette. And we know what he thinks of the French.

It is in the context of equivocal impositions that the imaginist, entitled and leisured Emma is eager to impose on the bit of Donwell tenant land a patriotic meaning. It would have no such significance for towny Mrs Elton, had she followed Emma through the grounds. The positive vision is solely with Emma, who, in her final coupling brings aesthetic understanding and manners to Mr Knightley's agricultural and commercial awareness. If neither partner quite reveals the sceptical intelligence of the narrator, they do combine to form an improved whole in person and land. They will see the sea but not suffer the inability of staying home, the infallible symptom of the modern mania of travelling for its own sake.

I want now to end with *Sanditon*, Austen's fragment which continues from landlocked *Emma* a concern for the body's health and where it might best be sustained. It describes a speculative seaside resort, equivalent in some way to Box Hill, that tourist spot whose influence reduced the Highbury villagers to fragmentation and discord.

With hindsight we know Austen wrote the 11 ½ chapters as she lay dying in Chawton. The family tried to keep it out of the public eye since they felt it detrimental to the image of the proper lady. Perhaps it was never intended for publication and certainly it's not in final form--a woman who wrote and rewrote even as she wrote—recycling and moderating not only ideas and characters but words, wouldn't necessarily have left even a shifting sandy fragment alone, but we can make the best of it, letting it deliver some of the ambiguities and ambivalences we're used to in the finished novels. The fragment may be interrogated, expanded and coloured in with research on hypochondria and hotels, sequels and seaweed, capitalism and consumerism, nationalism and unease, tea and muffins, and Englishness.

The coastal resort of Sanditon *is* English. It has weather, that most English of subjects, the predictable and unpredictable quality of which enters all Austen novels. Less dramatic than the snow and rain of *Emma,* but as crucial, is summer heat, desired and quickly criticised. This dominated the strawberry party in *Emma*, but nowhere is it so influential as in *Sanditon.* I want to stay indoors out of the sun in the Terrace lodgings where the Parker family is ignoring climatic signs—and indeed the very purpose of the created resort, sparkling in sunshine and freshness. The modern English way with the sun is to be in it. Here in the seaside resort, Arthur Parker,

younger brother of the ebullient speculator and prime mover of Sanditon, and his energetically ailing sisters, is happiest by a roaring fire. What are they doing there?

Not eating the cold meats that represent indoor decorum in summer for Mr Knightley, but having tea, that most English of rituals whether in a Victorian afternoon—or Regency evening. By the early 19th century the drinking of tea was accepted as a national pastime associated for good or ill with the civilising or emasculating effect of English women. (Tea was supposedly injurious to robust male health and to social stratification—see the famous onslaught of the 18th century Jonas Hanway)—but it became the staple of the home, part of an English identity. With it came toast, muffins or crumpets—all available in 21st century Austen re-enactments from North America to China and Pakistan.

In Sanditon lodgings Arthur at first expresses his bliss in 'relaxation of the languid frame' in the poet Cowper's words. Then he summons the family energy for toasting, that specifically English habit, result of the nation's favouring quickly staling and more desirable white over continental rye bread, and open fires over closed stoves. Here again Austen's letters are at best ambiguous. In 1805 she wrote of a visit to Edward Bridges, 'It is impossible to do justice to the hospitality of his attentions towards me: he made a point of ordering toasted cheese for supper entirely on my account.' Toast was a sign of English well-being and comfort, with the advantage that it required convivial effort and informality of seating arrangements, on which again the English prided themselves. In Victorian novels the action of toasting bread is often a metonym for the home—as also in television costume drama. In the 2007 film of *Northanger Abbey,* wanting more domestic romance than the book allowed— Andrew Davies created in the grand abbey a scene of toasting crumpets. When he arrived at an English country house P. G. Wodehouse said he liked 'the cup of tea, the crackling logs and buttered toast; the general atmosphere of leisured cosiness'. For imprisoned toad in *Wind in the Willows,* buttered toast is the ultimate English comfort food: its smell 'talked of warm kitchens, of breakfasts on bright frosty mornings, of cosy parlour firesides on winter evenings, when one's ramble was over and slippered feet were propped on the fender'. Byron said the word 'comfort' couldn't be applied to anything outside England. Many Victorian writers will use the teatime ritual to plead for social cohesion (e.g. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna) and in radio talks John Betjeman made buttered toast a symbol of common culture.

The comedy in *Sanditon* is that the tea-party is not in Toad's or Edward Bridges' cosy parlour but in *lodgings* with medicine bottles on the mantelpiece. The Parker family is taking tea under the censorious eye of the priggish, uncomfortable heroine Charlotte Heywood. In other Austen novels, the tea-table gives an activity to the heroine in embarrassing or unsafe circumstances: see Elizabeth Bennet's first visit to Pemberley or her boring tea with Mr Collins. But in *Sanditon* Charlotte resembles the foreign onlooker who assesses strange native habits in 18th- satirical century texts.

It's her first encounter with fat, flabby Arthur Parker:

> They were in one of the Terrace houses; and she found them arranged for the evening in a small neat drawing room, with a beautiful view of the sea if they had chosen it; but though it had been a very fair English summer day, not only was there no open window, but the sofa and the table, and the establishment in general was all at the other end of the room by a brisk fire....

Charlotte sits next to Arthur, who enjoys the pretty girl's company.

> ...The entrance of the servant with the tea things ... produced a great and immediate change. The young man's attentions were instantly lost. He took his own cocoa from the tray, which seemed provided with almost as many teapots as there were persons in company, Miss Parker drinking one sort of herb tea, and Miss Diana another and turning completely to the fire, sat coddling and cooking it to his own satisfaction and toasting some slices of bread, brought up ready-prepared in the toast rack—and till it was all done, she heard nothing of his voice but the murmuring of a few broken sentences of self-approbation and success.

A family tussle ensues especially over the amount of butter to be put on toast and the strength of cocoa allowed.

Arthur Parker is a man of 1817, little more than caricature perhaps but yet with what the critic Barbara Hardy called that 'surplus life... the implacable reminder of his social existence' through what he purchases or consumes. Arthur is a peacetime consumer. All Austen's earlier novels have been written or set in the French and Napoleonic wars. The young soldiers and sailors of *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* don't sit indoors coddling cocoa. The tea party in Sanditon is so excessive and freakish it swims out of the novel. I suggest that it becomes a parody of sentimental domesticity, Austen's farcical allegory of Englishness, as so often portrayed, and as it might be portrayed in a triumphal time of victorious peace.

The point is enforced in the speculating Mr Parker, who doesn't properly connect even with his own country, beyond a desire to exploit it commercially—he muddles towns and counties. The reason his family is shut indoors is because he has not accepted the disadvantages of leaving his ancestral valley home (similar in sheltered quality to viewless Donwell Abbey) and its kitchen garden—there'd been much emphasis on the country growing more food in wartime-- to perch them all on the windswept hills of Sanditon. There, for the sake of a view, food must be brought in or bought, and weather shut out.

In her novels Austen supports snugness but mainly against danger: the Harvilles and Crofts of *Persuasion* recreate on land the frightening life at sea. Now in 1817 ships are put up; the great ideological and political struggle of 22 years is so far over that its iconic battles are commodified into souvenirs and urban names. Trafalgar, meaning so much to Jane Austen though her sailor brothers, has lost cultural, even decorative, caché, to be replaced by the more recent Waterloo, the bubble of whose fame, would likely be popped long before Mr Parker died. Sanditon is not past- but future-directed, needing each summer season to be better than the last, more and more commodities to be added to its attractions. The fear of invasion of the south coast had worried England until 1815. Now the country is so liberated from the threat that *Sanditon* can comically rework the trope, with multiplying seaside resorts invading the coast. The sea that once kept England free exists for pleasure and relaxation, and the stable land that produced food for victory against anarchist and anarchic France, no longer defines it. It's hard to imagine Mr Knightley or indeed Mr Darcy turning his back on English 'culture', declaring with Mr Parker that he could not stand seeing a cabbage bed in winter. The old English romance of fighting the sea gives way to seaside frolics, as Emma's pretty English sight of fields, to a sublime windy 'view'.

Yoon Sun Lee has argued for irony's potential as source of civic cohesion in the period's leading conservative voices, from Burke and Scott to Carlyle. Without putting Austen firmly with these self-consciously non-English, conservative figures, I think she too at the end of her life is accentuating not disguising the anomalous character of (in her case) England's insular identity, at a moment when the old one from geography and hierarchy, exemplified in the imagined Austen village dominated by the great house which forms so much of the diet of present Heritage, had become as shifting (and as potentially unruly) as the commercial sands of Sanditon. The patriotism allowed in war and victory can't withstand the reality of fragmented peace which calls for commonsense and tolerance more than heroics, for civil men and women more than reckless sailors and soldiers. *Sanditon* begins with the energetic Parker going up the wrong road and overturning while the fat one stays home dominated by his sisters. The novel may have concluded with the resort tumbling into the sea, but it may have equivocated.

I end with the only finished, authentic portrait of Jane Austen, whose expression we can't see and whose view may be neither beautiful nor sublime but gently and genially critical.

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