

The Politically Incorrect Austen

Jane Austen: Without a room of her own

When we go from the great Romantic poets to Jane Austen, we're turning from truly great literary artists forgotten (or studiously ignored) by PC professors to a genius whose life and work have been neglected, but distorted beyond recognition. Jane Austen is a real problem for the politically correct English establishment—and most especially for the feminists. She's obviously the greatest woman writer in English—possibly the greatest female literary artist, period. No other English writer, man or woman, is so often (and so justly) compared to Shakespeare. Feminist novelist and critic Virginia Woolf herself called Austen “the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal.”¹ But Jane Austen did it all without the “room of her own” and the money that Woolf's famous essay, “A Room of One's Own,” explains women need in order to be able to succeed as writers of fiction.²

According to feminist theory, women have been robbed of opportunities by patriarchal oppression. Their real voices have been silenced by the subordinate roles—passive love object stuck up on a pedestal, submissive wife, doting mother, domestic drudge—that they've been forced into, in aid of male domination. What's necessary, if women are to come into their own as literary artists, is that they should throw off the shackles of the patriarchy and find their own independent voices.

But our greatest female writer somehow found her voice without having to be liberated from the patriarchy. Jane Austen spent her whole life financially dependent on her father and brothers, shared a room with her sister Cassandra, and, according to her nephew, must have written her novels—for want of that supposedly indispensable private room—“in the general sitting room, subject to all kinds of interruptions.”³ She was careful not to let visitors, including her own nieces and nephews, think that any project of her own took precedence over her duty to make them welcome, and her genuine interest in their concerns.

She managed men—from the Prince Regent's asinine librarian to her own beloved (but occasionally boorish, indiscrete, or ridiculous) brothers and nephews—in just the way a traditional woman used to handle a man: with a mixture of, on the one hand, flattering admiration for his splashier talents and respect for his superior position and, on the other, a serene confidence in her own mastery of the emotional aspects of the relationship. (If you're old enough, you may have observed this technique in a pre-women's liberation grandmother.) Somehow Jane Austen's genius was robust enough to survive and even flourish under conditions of “female subordination.”

It's not as if feminism hadn't yet been invented in Jane Austen's day. Mary Wollstonecraft (Mary Shelley's mother and, like William Wordsworth, a sort of fellow traveler who lived in France during the Revolution), who was sixteen years Austen's senior, had a career that would do any feminist proud. Wollstonecraft started a girls' school, became a proponent of co-education, published a book⁴ arguing that the “oppression” of women had produced a “gangrene” that pervaded society and comparing marriage with slavery and prostitution, took a lover who shared her radical politics and whose infidelities (commencing as soon as she became pregnant) drove her to attempt suicide.

Meanwhile Jane Austen was living a traditional woman's life—looking forward, as a little girl, to growing up and getting married, learning to play the piano, devouring novels (and writing hilarious spoofs of some of them), spending her youth as “the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly,”⁵ and then, when it became clear she wasn't going to receive a proposal from any man she wanted to marry, settling into old-maidhood and the dignity of an aunt. And through it all she was cultivating attitudes—and, eventually, writing novels—incompatible with feminism of any stripe.

Nothing could be more alien to Jane Austen than the two attitudes that inevitably characterize feminists, whether of her day or of our own: humorless righteous indignation, on the one hand, and a kind of embittered peevishness, on the other.⁶ (Mary Wollstonecraft is a good example of the angry or ranting school of feminism; Virginia Woolf, of the peevish or catty school.) The essence of feminism is the belief that life is horribly unfair—that the other half of the human race is in some kind of conspiracy (whether conscious or not) to keep women down. To the feminist, the structures of patriarchal society are links in the chain of female subordination. Every one of the thousand small distinctions that our society has traditionally made between men and women, and that haven't been completely eradicated even to this day, is another piece of evidence for the nefarious plot: naturally, for feminists, everyday life is full of occasions for outbursts of rage—or for harboring grudges and making sarcastic remarks, depending on your temperament. The one possibility that the feminists refuse on principle even to consider is that the traditional differences between male and female roles are necessitated by the real, natural, and ineradicable differences between men and women. Feminist literary critics call this idea “essentialism,” and shrink from it in horror, as if it were the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost. And it's exactly what Jane Austen believed.

Celebrating “patriarchal values”

Miss Jane Austen found it quite natural that men and women should occupy roles defined by their sexes. Her religion, which she took very seriously indeed, taught her that wives should obey their husbands. Perhaps even more to the point, it taught her that human misery is caused not by traditional societal structures but by individual sin, and that every member of the human race, male or female, is capable of vice and folly and has a duty to struggle against them. This struggle—not the war between the sexes or a campaign of subversive resistance to the patriarchy—provides the drama in Jane Austen’s novels.

The fact is, Jane Austen’s novels show the failure of female self-control, on the one hand, and men’s abdication of their proper responsibility, on the other, as among the chief causes of women’s unhappiness. Far from being “subversive” of traditional gender roles, Jane Austen’s novels celebrate them. This is one area where she’s comparable to Shakespeare,

and, arguably, outdoes him: her novels are masterful celebrations of marriage. Jane Austen paints what now has to be called old-fashioned marriage—the institution into which a woman entered expecting to be guided and protected by her husband, to look up to and to please him, and to be responsible for the management of a household and the nurture of children—as both the most usual and the most intense source of female happiness.

The feminists and other postmodernist

critics have resorted to a variety of subterfuges to convince their readers—and possibly even themselves—that Jane Austen was in some sense in sympathy with their goals. Their wishful thinking is fairly obvious. Early feminist Virginia Woolf, for example, felt compelled to admit Jane Austen’s greatness. But she was unhappy with Miss Austen’s novels, whose confident femininity is quite at odds with Woolf’s own rebellion against traditional female roles and her resentment of men. Woolf escaped from her dilemma by retreating into fantasy: she devoted her essay on Jane Austen to an exploration, not of the six novels she actually wrote, but instead of the six very different—but wholly imaginary—novels that Jane Austen “might have written had she lived to be sixty. We do not grudge it to him, but her brother the Admiral lived to be ninety-one.”* (See what I mean about the peevish or catty school of feminism?)

Jane Austen critics in our own day also tend to argue from what’s not there, though they don’t go to the length of creating an entire alternative-

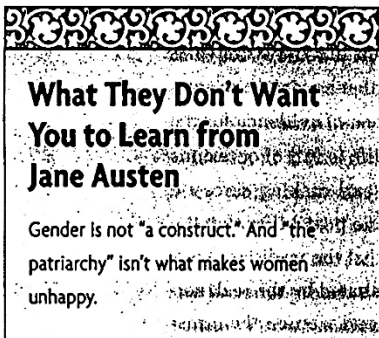
reality oeuvre out of thin air. Instead, they argue from the “silences” in Jane Austen’s novels. Or they find some slight similarity between a Jane Austen novel and another text, and then argue from the other text.⁹ They grasp at every expression of discontent (from whatever cause) in Austen’s letters and make it out to be a protest against the patriarchy. And they ignore and explain away the obviously anti-feminist ideas in the novels themselves. Everything Jane Austen says that’s in line with “patriarchal values”—in other words, with the traditional wisdom of Western culture about men and women—is written off in one way or another. The standard feminist line, that Jane Austen is “subversive” of the patriarchy, can never be refuted by any amount of evidence. Every piece of counter-evidence either shows her slipping back into the false consciousness of a subordinated woman, or it’s the camouflage of a secret feminist, or else it shows Jane Austen being only a part-time feminist, who at other times buys into patriarchal subordination so she can hang onto her membership in a dominant social class.¹⁰ It’s axiomatic for the feminists that there’s nothing to see in the relations between the sexes but oppression by men and compliance or rebellion by women. Naturally, that’s what they find in Jane Austen’s novels.

But what if you take off your patriarchy-colored glasses? The postmodernists will laugh at your naivety, but if you admit that there just possibly may be other things going on between men and women besides patriarchal oppression, you will pretty quickly notice that Jane Austen has her own ideas about “gender.” And if you do Austen the courtesy of taking her ideas seriously—if you consider her insights about men and women as at least as worthy of your respect as feminist theory—you might (postmodernism forbid!) learn something.

Jane Austen is not “subversive.” Jane Austen is funny. She happily pokes fun at every kind of superficiality and pretense—male selfishness, female hypocrisy, it was all fair game to her. She would have made hilarious hay with modern feminism. Jane Austen’s complex and fascinating views on men and women can’t be boiled down to a simple formula like the feminist slogans complaining that women have been silenced, or that men are afraid of female sexuality. But Austen’s thinking does provide a pretty stark contrast with feminist theory. Take, for example, the “obscured female voice”¹¹ the feminists obsess over. Jane Austen suggests that women could generally benefit from more, not less, self-control and silence.

Women who are bossy (and talk too much)

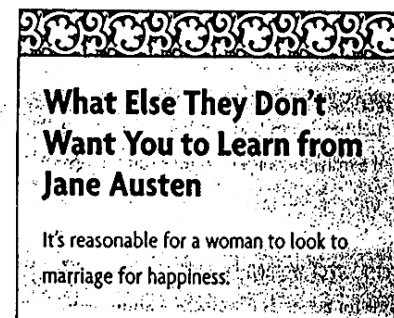
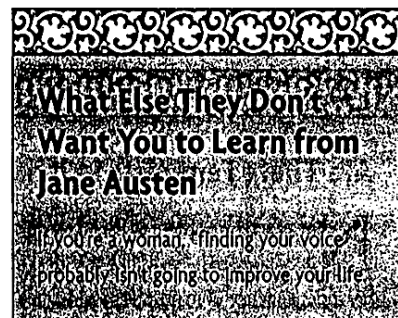
Jane Austen’s novels are full of women who are too free with their tongues. Some of them are just silly, or, at worst, embarrassingly vulgar—like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose premature gossip about



her eldest daughter's success with a rich young man determines the man's friend to get the young man out of the neighborhood, and nearly break her daughter's heart. Another one of her daughters complains, in one of many moments of excruciating embarrassment caused by her mother, that "years of happiness could not make Jane or herself amends for moments of such painful confusion." Other female characters' habits of selfish whining make their families miserable, and themselves ridiculous. And still others' loose talk betrays their lack of fastidiousness about sex. This kind of boldness does not—whatever the feminists may imagine about men's fear of the power of female sexuality—empower women in Jane Austen's novels. In *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford loses Edmund by letting him see that she condemns a pair of adulterers not so much for their adultery as because they got caught. And the most brazen offender against delicacy in these matters, Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, ends up beholden to disgusted relatives and friends who have to bribe her seducer to marry her.

Then there are several women in the novels who combine a not very feminine insistence on being in control with a typically feminine eye for detail—a mixture that makes their bossy interference, especially in the lives of other female characters, a really painful persecution. Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* is one example: "Elizabeth found that nothing was beneath this great lady's attention, which could furnish her with an occasion for dictating to others." While the feminists tend to explain bad female behavior as the unfortunate outcome of the patriarchy's stunting and warping of women's lives,¹² Jane Austen shows this fault as the likely outcome of being spoiled by too much money. And—what would no doubt give the feminists fits if they could bring themselves to contemplate it—Jane Austen also suggests that the lack of a man in charge is a contributing factor to the cancerous growth of these women's egos. Lady Catherine and Mrs. Ferrars are rich widows; Mrs. Ferrars's daughter and Mrs. Elton both have their husbands wrapped around their little fingers.

Jane Austen is not a misogynist. It would be hard to find a writer whose attractive female characters are more attractive, and more truly admirable. But the women who let their "voices" just go or whose chief concern is how much power they have, are not her attractive characters. Most of her heroines—and even her two most fascinating villainesses—engage in a high degree of self-censorship.



Emma Woodhouse, on the other hand, whom Jane Austen called "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like," is in some danger of ending up as an interfering, bossy old dragon in the Lady Catherine de Bourgh line. She's twenty-one years old, "handsome, clever, and rich." She's spoiled, not only because of her money and good looks, but also because her "affectionate, indulgent" father is a hypochondriac who doesn't have the energy to give her any guidance, and whose mind, in any case, would be no match for her own. Emma amuses herself with match-making, which the Woodhouses' family friend, Mr. Knightley (the only person who ever criticizes Emma to her face), points out is hardly a proper or delicate activity for a young lady.

Emma is an average or even archetypal young woman. She's freed up to be even more herself than most women because she's blessed with more than average of everything that a young woman could possibly want—money, good looks, intelligence, and freedom from the usual constraints parents impose. Her father's failure to be "patriarchal" is a necessary condition of the freedom that she abuses. Emma behaves the way she does because she's spoiled. Prosperity, admiration, and freedom from restraint spoil people, and large doses of all those things can spoil them completely—as anyone can deduce from the lives of Hollywood stars and Roman emperors.

Emma, as Jane Austen has Lady Catherine de Bourgh brag about herself, has "not been used to submit to any person's whims"; she has "not

been in the habit of brooking disappointment." And the choices Emma makes—especially her choice of Harriet Smith, "the natural daughter of somebody" boarding at a local school, for a friend—show that always getting her own way is making Emma proud and selfish. Picking Harriet is partly about *not* choosing to be real friends with Jane Fairfax: a girl of Emma's own class, who's just as poor and just as beautiful as Harriet, but as intelligent as Emma

herself, and much more accomplished. But Jane reminds Emma of her own few faults and inferiorities, whereas Harriet gives Emma endless opportunities to indulge herself in condescension and advice, and to bask in Harriet's uncritical gratitude. Naturally Emma is determined not to marry. If she'd rather enjoy Harriet's blind flattery than make the effort to live up to a real friendship with a girl who's her equal, why on earth should she want a husband to look up to, and children (who are notoriously labor-intensive and ungrateful) to take care of?

But, luckily for her, Emma inhabits a world (part early-nineteenth-century England, part Jane Austen's peerless moral imagination), whose "patriarchal values" oppose her bad habits. In Emma's case it's only her own laziness and pride—not the women's magazines she buys, the self-help books she reads, and the professors she has in college—telling her to quit worrying about other people's feelings and say whatever she feels like saying, cheering her on when she puts herself first, arguing that it's beneath her dignity to follow a man's moral lead, and pointing out that she'd be a fool to look for happiness in marriage and motherhood. And, as a very ordinary young woman, Emma has some powerful impulses that undercut her resistance to "patriarchal values." Mr. Knightley's attention and approval have always been important to her. Fighting against her pride is her natural female desire to be guided—even corrected and improved—by the man she loves. And when she knows she loves him, and he loves her, she delights to remember, and to talk over with Mr. Knightley, the history of his influence on her. Emma, as an average sort of woman, is built in such a way that looking up to—and even promising to obey—a man she can truly respect doesn't seem like settling for being less than her solitary self; it seems like growing up into being something more.

Men who aren't patriarchal enough

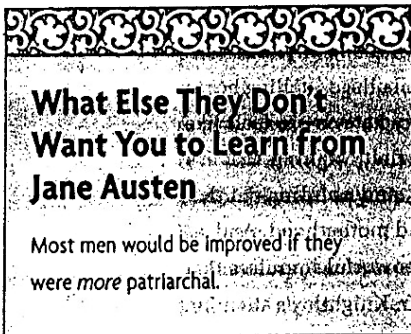
There are plenty of spoiled men in Jane Austen's novels too, but men seem to spoil differently than women. Male human beings seem to have their own characteristic flaws—which definitely aren't the things feminists accuse men of. The feminists' villains insist on dominating women. Jane Austen's villains are more likely to shirk their responsibilities. Women in Jane Austen's novels cause pain by being bossy and interfering. But most of the damage men do is because they *don't* involve themselves and take charge. There aren't a lot of repressive patriarchs in Jane Austen's novels. What there are a lot of, are men who aren't patriarchal enough.

Jane Austen's novels are as full of men who ought to "find their voice," stand up for themselves, and take control as they are of women who won't shut up. There are the contemptible uxorious husbands who do mean and petty things under the influence of their awful wives. Mr. Elton humiliates Harriet Smith in public to please his vulgar new bride. John Dashwood lets his selfish wife persuade him to break the promise he

gave to his dying father, to take care of his sisters. Underlining his self-imposed impotence, this sad excuse for a man explains—to the sister whose life he could transform at very little cost to himself, if he weren't a doormat for his selfish wife—"people have little, have very little in their power."

And then there are the men who fail to be effective fathers, allowing headstrong female relatives to come between themselves and their children. Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* retreats into his library (and into his sardonic sense of humor) to escape his ridiculous wife and the daughters she lets run wild. Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father, is so weak that it doesn't even occur to him that he has a duty to control Emma; he lets her take care of him. *Mansfield Park's* Sir Thomas Bertram looks more like a real patriarch. He is a strict parent, and his strictness is a mistake—but not because he succeeds in controlling his daughters and teaching them to repress their desires. Quite the opposite. His mistake is *failing to interfere* to the extent of teaching his daughters "the necessity of self-denial and humility." Ironically, Sir Thomas's "severity"—in contrast to the "indulgence and flattery" of Mrs. Norris (their morally tone-deaf, interfering busybody aunt, to whom he's delegated too much of their upbringing)—has taught his daughters "to repress their spirits" only "in his presence." Sir Thomas doesn't really get to know his daughters until it's too late. The very worst thing he does—allow his daughter Maria to marry a worthless man he knows she doesn't love—he does because he's reluctant to scrutinize her motives too closely, and because he believes whatever is most convenient to him to believe about her temperament.

This same tendency not to take responsibility—to keep their options open, not to get involved—is what makes young men so dangerous. The villains in Jane Austen's novels are not rapists, wife-beaters, or even jealous husbands. They're men who don't stick around. It's not men's violent, "controlling" urges that make it necessary for parents to look out for their daughters; it's men's tendencies to avoid (or weasel out of) commitment that do. In each of the novels there's at least one man who pays a woman the kind of attention he knows (if he thinks it through) that he shouldn't pay her unless his intentions are serious—and they're not. In Jane Austen's view, this kind of behavior seems to be an occupational hazard of being male.



The benefits (to women) of "sexist" conventions

It's partly because Jane Austen saw that the "fault[s] of temper" and "evil habits in which we [indulge] to the discomfort of our fellow creatures, and the danger of our own souls"¹³ were likely to be gender-specific that she was a fan of "patriarchal" conventions—rules for women that are different from the rules for men. To feminists, these rules seem to exist for the "subordination" of women and the "domination" of men. But Jane Austen could see good reason for them, even for the ones that look pretty silly to liberated twenty-first-century women. Here are some of the rules that Marianne Dashwood breaks in *Sense and Sensibility*. She makes no effort to hide from a young man who appears to be courting her that she's head over heels in love with him, even though he hasn't said he loves her. She accepts an expensive present from him. She allows him to give her a tour of his aunt's house without having introduced her to his aunt. And—this is the really shocking breach of etiquette in the novel, the one that makes her own sister believe Marianne's partly to blame when the young man ends up jilting her to marry for money—she writes letters to him, despite the fact that they're not engaged to be married.

We can sympathize with Marianne's impatience with these rules. But surely we can also recognize that they had some basis in the stubborn realities of male and female psychology. Two generations after the triumph

of "women's liberation," it's women, not men, writing letters to advice columnists to ask why their sex partners don't want to have real relationships. And it's women who have made bestsellers of *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets of Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* and *He's Just Not That Into You: The No Excuses Truth to Understanding Guys*, in the attempt to understand why, when they're the pursuers, their love lives don't work out the way they want.

Surely even feminist professors who study Jane Austen must know more men who are "afraid of commitment" than they know men who are jealous, abusing control freaks. But feminism teaches them that "the patriarchy" is always and everywhere the real problem. When Jane Austen expresses traditional beliefs—that men should be encouraged to take charge, that female self-control and even silence can be real blessings, or that the same virtues that prepare us for Heaven "will secure to us the best enjoyment of what this world can give"¹⁴—the feminists can't see what she's saying as a commentary on reality. But you can compare Jane Austen's ideas about what makes people happy or unhappy with the feminists' fantasies about subverting the patriarchy, and decide where you'll pin your hopes.



Victorian literature

The ending of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is a lot like the end of the Romantic Era itself. Marianne Dashwood, badly burnt by her experiment with passionate Rousseauian naturalness, finds refuge in religious principle, conventional standards, and what we might call traditional family values. She marries—"with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship"—the thirty-something bachelor whose conventionality she used to laugh at with the young man who went on to break her heart. Marianne settles for much less than she had once hoped. She's willing to settle because she's seen where her blindness to the cold, hard facts about human nature might have taken her. She had her heart broken, but it might have been even worse: her lover, it turns out, had already seduced, impregnated, and abandoned another girl who was in love with him.

The Victorian reaction to the excesses of Romanticism is a similar retreat from revolutionary hopes into tradition and convention. It didn't produce as spectacular a literature, but plenty of fine things very much worth reading were written in Victorian England. If the Romantic Era was a second golden age for English literature, the long reign of Queen Victoria is a silver age. There are a number of poets (beginning with Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, and including at least Matthew Arnold, George Meredith, and Gerard Manley Hopkins), essayists (Carlyle, Newman, and Ruskin, at least) and novelists (the Brontës, George Eliot, Thackeray, Trollope, and Hardy are the other big ones) that you absolutely shouldn't miss. But if you're going to try only one Victorian writer, it should be Charles Dickens.

What Else They Don't Want You to Learn from Jane Austen

Societal conventions exist for our protection; we discard them at our own risk.



Are There Feminists in Jane Austen's Novels?

Not exactly. But there at least two characters who act a lot *like* feminists. Louisa Musgrove in *Persuasion* behaves like the ideal feminist heroine. She makes a huge production about her independence of mind. She's a girl who's determined to do what she wants, and who won't be turned from her decided course of action to please anyone else. Caroline Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* stands up for women's accomplishments and condemns other women who won't join in solidarity with the sisterhood of women. And both of these characters come off looking uncommonly silly—not least because Louisa's apparent independence and Caroline's solidarity with the sisterhood *both have no other purpose than to impress some man*.

Louisa is naturally bold. But she's playing up her independence precisely because Captain Wentworth has praised her for being resolute. She's enjoying his attention, so she finds it natural to act in a way he approves of. When Louisa's stubbornness ends in a near fatal accident, Anne, the novel's real heroine, wonders "whether it ever occurred to [Wentworth] now, to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character. . . . She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favor of happiness as a very resolute character." Later, when Louisa falls in love with a different man, she will cultivate different qualities—ones that suit him, instead: "... she would learn to be an enthusiast for Scott and Lord Byron. . . . Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste and sentimental reflection was amusing, but [Anne] had no doubt of its being so."

Caroline Bingley trumpets her solidarity with the sisterhood of women—standing up for women's accomplishments, and criticizing Elizabeth Bennet for acting as if women's abilities have any limits—precisely in order to make Mr. Darcy think better of her and worse of Elizabeth. But he sees right through her:

"Eliza Bennet," said Miss Bingley, when the door had closed on her, "is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But in my opinion, it is a paltry device, and a very mean art."

"Undoubtedly," replied Darcy, to whom this remark was chiefly addressed, "there is meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable."

Miss Bingley was not so entirely satisfied with this reply as to continue the subject.

