

Jane Austen: The Economic Vulnerability of Women

Jane Austen's works can be easily read as novels which simply provide lively entertainment in their vivid description of the manners of her times, but in doing so a very important concern of the author would be missed. A more careful study of Austen's novels clearly points to her awareness of the economic vulnerability of women in the 1800s, a vulnerability which quite often leads to the lack of provision for their needs and those of their children.

To better understand Jane Austen's preoccupation with the economic status of women and its importance in her works, it would be helpful to briefly mention her social position in life. Jane Austen was the unmarried daughter of a country clergyman. She was fully aware of the difference between her own station and that of the landed classes.

Her position was one of insecurity and it is never forgotten in her novels. She fully comprehends the hardship and restrictions caused by the lack of income¹. In Austen's *Emma*, a perfect example of this is Mr Knightley's reaction to Emma's harsh treatment of Miss Bates:

How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?
How could you be so insolent in your
wit to a woman of her character, age and
situation? Emma, I had not thought it possible...
Were she a woman of fortune, I would
leave every harmless absurdity to take its
chance, I would not quarrel with you for any
liberties of manner. Were she your equal in
situation – but Emma, consider how far this
is from being the case. She is poor; she has
sunk from the comforts she was born to;

and if she live to an old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!2.

The words spoken by Mr Knightley are written by Jane Austen to stress the fact that a woman's economic status is precarious, especially that of a single woman, such as Miss Bates who is forced to care for herself and her mother.

Austen knows that income is necessary to maintain life and that the loss of income brings financial difficulty which can easily lead to material hardship. The Dashwoods, the Bennets, Miss Bates and her mother are the characters brought to life by Jane Austen, not only to amuse her readers but to underline the harshness of the economic reality the women of her period faced. The period's single most important source of capital was the possession of land. As Tony Tanner so rightfully points out, the society of which Jane Austen was a part and of which she wrote was based on landed interests, the sacredness of property.

Tanner reminds us that since John Locke affirmed in *The Second Treatise of Government*, written in 1690, that the end of government was the preservation of property, the rights of property were continually stressed. Through the 1800s society's order and stability were tied to the rights of property until they became considered as identical 3.

The theme of the vulnerability of women regarding the right to inherit property is a dominant one in Austen's works. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen informs her readers that:

Mr Bennet's property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters was entailed in default of heirs male, on a distant relation; and their mother's fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill

supply the deficiency of his. Her father had been an attorney in Meryton, and had left her four thousand pounds⁴.

With no inheritance rights to their land, consequently, the Bennet women in *Pride and Prejudice* are destined at the death of Mr Bennet to lose the Longbourn estate to Mr Collins, the nearest male heir, and become dependent on the meagre income to be derived from the interest on the 4000 pounds from their mother's marriage articles. The Dashwood women in *Sense and Sensibility* upon the death of Mr Dashwood are forced to leave their home, the estate of Norland which is bequeathed to Mr Dashwood's son, John, from his first marriage.

Jane Austen was very interested in the condition of women who are subjected to the loss of home. As a clergyman's daughter, she knew that her home depended only on her father's life, once he died, the Rectory would go to another incumbent, and, as his income was the chief financial resource, she and her mother and sister would be dependent on the generosity of her brothers. Jane Austen was fully aware of the dangers and difficulties inherent in relying upon the kindness of male relatives. John Dashwood's idea of "generosity" towards his sisters and their mother speaks loudly enough:

It will be better that there should be no annuity in the case; whatever I may give them occasionally will be of far greater assistance than a yearly allowance, because they would only enlarge their style of living if they felt sure of a larger income, and would not be sixpence the richer for it at the end of the year. It will certainly be much the best way. A present of fifty pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father⁵.

Even women who did possess fortunes did not have direct control of the money they owned in Jane Austen's times. Male trustees would have the custody of their fortunes. If the trustees were honest and careful to make safe investments, women could then rely on a fixed, regular income. If the trustees were, on the other hand, dishonest or made bad investments, then a woman could be left with nothing⁶. However the case, women had no power of decision. In Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's friend Mrs Smith falls victim to the indolence of Mr Elliot, the executor of her late husband's will, who refuses to pursue her rights to an income from her West Indian property:

Mr Smith had appointed him the executor of his will; but Mr Elliot would not act, and the difficulties and distresses which this refusal had heaped on her, in addition to the inevitable sufferings of her situation, had been such as could not be related without anguish of spirit, or listened to without corresponding indignation.

Anne was shewn some letters of his on the occasion, answers to urgent applications from Mrs Smith, which all breathed the same stern resolution of not engaging in a fruitless trouble, and under a cold civility, the same hard-hearted indifference to any of the evils it might bring on her. It was a dreadful picture of ingratitude and inhumanity; and Anne felt at some moments, that no flagrant open crime could have been worse⁷.

It can safely be assumed that Anne's feelings are those of Jane Austen's, that is, that a woman's economic position was always at risk because it was always in the hands of others.

In the 1800s, women in England, whether they belonged to the gentry, the urban middle class, or the rural poor, all saw

matrimony as a safeguard which provided them with the economic support they needed. Women who were members of the gentry or the aristocracy were given capital sums but they were largely small sums.

As a consequence, women, for accommodation and for the expenses of running a household, depended on men: initially their fathers and subsequently, it was hoped, their husbands⁸.

In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Lucas, the daughter of Sir William and Lady Lucas, accepts the courtship of Mr Collins despite his evident stupidity.

Austen admits that Collins was "neither sensible nor agreeable, his society was irksome.....But still he would be her husband." Charlotte Lucas, as many women of Austen's times, saw marriage as her main object. Sir William could give her little fortune and so matrimony was "the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune andmust be their pleasantest preservative from want"⁹.

Those women who could not turn to male relations for economic support had few alternative choices. Jane Fairfax's economic situation when we first meet with her in Austen's *Emma* does not include the financial support of a father, a brother, or a husband. She, in fact, is an orphan, the only child of the youngest daughter of Mrs Bates. Her father's close friend, Colonel Campbell, decides to take her in and therefore Jane goes to live with the Campbell family. Colonel Campbell, however, not being able to provide for her decides "that she should be brought up for educating others; the very few hundred pounds which she inherited from her father making independence impossible"¹⁰. Jane Fairfax's destiny, it seems, is to become a governess, the only choice of paid employment for middle-class women of that period. Governesses during this time typically worked long days teaching their charges for annual wages of about fifteen to twenty-five pounds. Jane

Fairfax sees her future life as a governess as bleak and lonely, a life filled with hardship and sacrifice. Austen knows that her only other choice is matrimony and so in the end her secret engagement to Frank Churchill becomes known and the position found for her by Mrs Elton is quickly forgotten. Women during Jane Austen's times did not have many rewarding job opportunities. Austen knows only too well that material comfort was provided by marriage.

In examining the constant presence of economic concern in Jane Austen's works, the influence that Adam Smith had in those times should not be overlooked. It is very well known that his great work, *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, signaled the end of feudal Europe and the beginning of the industrial age. It provided a rationale for the revolution in the economic order. His definition of "necessaries" was widely accepted by his contemporaries:

By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without¹¹.

The pages of Jane Austen's novels are filled with exact calculations of the sum of money needed by her female characters to supply those "necessaries" so clearly defined by Adam Smith. That sum more commonly called "competence", as is explained by Edward Copeland, establishes exactly how much money was needed to live a life of gentility. Jane Austen teaches us that the competence could easily increase or decrease depending on the pretensions of the person to rank and status. A conversation which takes place between the two Dashwood sisters, Marianne and Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, demonstrates this point, when they share their estimates of just what each one thinks an adequate competence might be. Marianne names "about eighteen hundred or

two thousand a year, not more than that" as her ideal. Elinor quickly responds, "Two thousand a year! One is my wealth!"¹².

Marianne's competence is an income which is appropriate for the minor gentry; Elinor instead sets her income at an amount which represents that of a prosperous Anglican clergyman. At the end of the novel, Austen sees to it that each woman reaches her desired competence, through marriage of course!

Copeland's study shows that the yearly income is a recurrent theme in women's fiction at the turn of the century. Women novelists of all ranks and political opinions calculate the specific spending power of different annual incomes¹³. Among the annual incomes described throughout Austen's novels, it might be of interest to dwell upon that of five hundred pounds a year. Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* enumerates the luxuries her four female in-laws will enjoy on this yearly income:

And what on earth can four women want for more than that? – They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be!¹⁴.

Perhaps the harshness of Fanny Dashwood's words take on an even stronger meaning when it is realized that Jane Austen's competence was a little less than five hundred pounds a year!

After having examined Jane Austen's works and their preoccupation with the economic status of women, the words of Watts and Smith in their study *Economics in Literature and Drama* ring especially true. Watts and Smith claim that even though literature and drama are considered as institutions that function separately from economic forces and

conditions, they, nevertheless, influence and shape public opinion in many economic issues. Therefore, literature and drama should not be neglected because they are important sources for economic instruction¹⁵. In reading the novels of Jane Austen, it can be truly believed that her works have, in their own way, contributed to the realization of the economic freedom that women enjoy today. Let us not forget that :

“The prophet and the poet may regenerate the world without the economist, but the economist cannot regenerate it without them.” Philip Wicksteed¹⁶.

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Note

1 Mary Evans, *Jane Austen and the State* (1987), pp. 10-12. London: Tavistock Publications.

2 Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816) 1996, p. 346. New York: Barnes and Nobel Books.

3 Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (1986), p.16. London: Macmillan.

4 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) 1996, p.29. London: Penguin Books.

5 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) 1990, p. 9. New York: Oxford University Press.

6 Edward Copeland, *Women writing about money: women's fiction in England, 1790-1820* (1995), p. 17-

20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) 1985, p. 215. London: Penguin Books.

8 Mary Evans, *Jane Austen and the State*, p. 18, op.cit.

9 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 120, op. cit.

10 Jane Austen, *Emma*, p. 149, op. cit.

11 Adam Smith quoted in Edward Copeland, *Women writing about money: women's fiction in England, 1790-1820*, p. 8, op. cit.

12 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 9, op. cit.

13 Edward Copeland, *Women writing about money: women's fiction*

in England, 1790-1820, pp. 20-24, op. cit.

14 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 9, op. cit.

15 Michael Watts and Robert F Smith, *Economics in Literature and Drama* in *The Journal of Economic Education*, Vol. 20 N° 3 (Summer 1989), p. 293. New York: Heldref Publications.

16 Philip Wicksteed quoted in Michael Watts and Robert F Smith, *Economics in Literature and Drama*, p. 291, op. cit.

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