



WHAT  
MATTERS  
IN  
JANE  
AUSTEN?



TWENTY CRUCIAL  
PUZZLES SOLVED

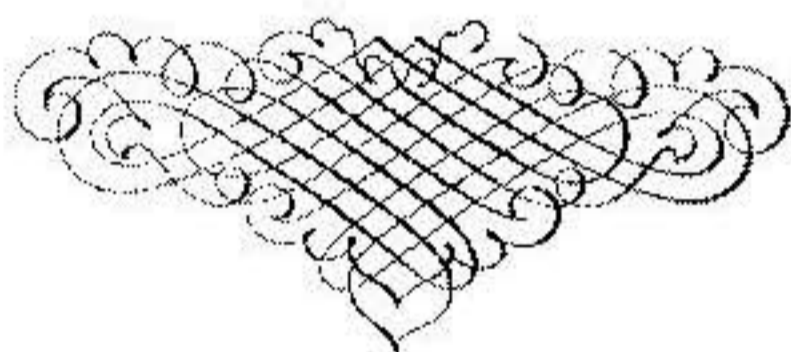


JOHN MULLAN

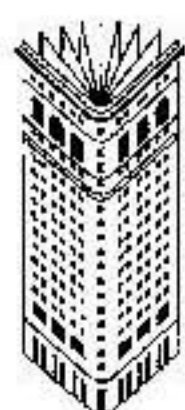


# WHAT MATTERS IN JANE AUSTEN?

*Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved*



JOHN MULLAN



BLOOMSBURY PRESS

NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Copyright © 2012 by John Mullan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address  
Bloomsbury Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Published by Bloomsbury Press, New York

All papers used by Bloomsbury Press are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Mullan, John, 1958–  
What matters in Jane Austen? : twenty crucial puzzles solved / John  
Mullan. — 1st U.S. ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-62040-041-8 (alk. paper)

1. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PR4037.M854 2013

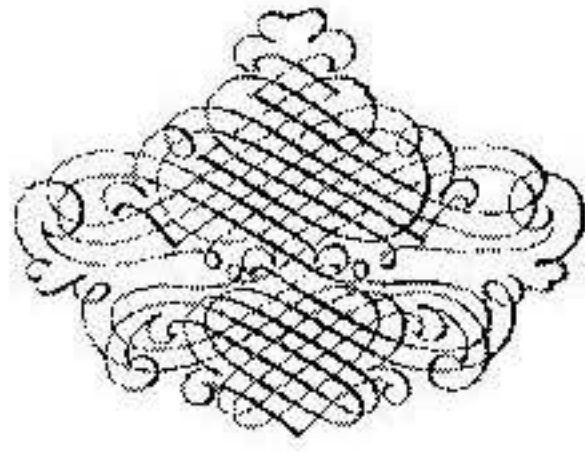
823'.7—dc23

2012033528

First U.S. Edition 2013

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh  
Printed in the U.S.A.



## EIGHT

# Do We Ever See the Lower Classes?

'The man who fetches our letters every morning (one of our men, I forget his name) shall inquire for yours too and bring them to you.'

*Emma*, II. xvi

It is usual to observe that Jane Austen's novels have no room for the labouring classes. Defenders will say that she is simply limiting herself to the world and the genteel classes that she knew; critics will suggest that the exclusion from her fiction of all except gentlemen and ladies shows a certain narrowness of the imagination, for she was certainly surrounded by members of the labouring classes. In Chawton when she arrived, the majority of the 400 or so inhabitants were forestry or agricultural workers.<sup>1</sup> The charge of the critics is worth a careful answer, since Austen herself invites the reader to be unsettled by one of her own characters' absolute negligence of the lower orders. Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park* has inherited a rich Norfolk estate. When he is trying to woo Fanny Price in Portsmouth, he talks of how he has been doing good on behalf of industrious families there. 'He



The crucial distinction is between those who employ servants, and those who do not. Almost all the named characters who belong to the latter category in Austen's novels are themselves servants; to her first readers, as habituated to the presence of servants as the novelist, they would not have been invisible at all. Indeed, her novels rely on the readers 'seeing' these servants in a way that we have forgotten to do. Her characters are wise not to forget that they are often observed by servants. Colonel Brandon recalls how his planned elopement with Eliza, the woman he loved who was promised in marriage to his brother, was scotched by a servant. 'The treachery, or the folly, of my cousin's maid betrayed us' (II. ix). It is a foolish person who does not shape conversation to take account of the presence of servants. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and the Gardiners are relieved when Mrs Bennet withdraws to her room in the wake of Lydia's elopement, 'for they knew that she had not prudence enough to hold her tongue before the servants, while they waited at table' (III. v). Hearing the account of her mother's reactions when the news about Lydia was first broken, Elizabeth cries out that every servant must have known 'the whole story before the end of the day'. And when the servants know, so does the world. They are self-interested monitors, who will not necessarily protect those whom they watch. Lady Catherine de Bourgh boasts of having sent two servants with her niece to Ramsgate ('I am excessively attentive to all these things'), but they do not manage to prevent the planned elopement (I. xiv). In fact, the scheme is facilitated by a diabolical servant, Mrs Younge, the former governess to Miss Darcy.

The reader who supposes that Austen's fictional servants form a class of devoted, silent attendants will miss many tricks. The fact that servants are also a problem is behind Mr Bennet's remark to his just-engaged daughter Jane that she

and Bingley are 'so easy, that every servant will cheat you' (III. xiii). Servants have their own interests. It would have been odd for Austen's novels not to imagine difficulties with servants, for her own letters are full of them. Writing to her niece Anna in 1814, Aunt Jane pauses from detailed advice about her would-be novel to tell her important news. 'Your Aunt Frank's Housemaid has just given her warning, but whether she is worth your having, or w<sup>d</sup> take your place I know not . . . She leaves your Aunt, because she cannot agree with her fellow servants. She is in love with the Man—& her head seems rather turned' (*Letters*, 108). She goes on to detail her relations and previous service. Her letters sometimes hint at the shifting balance of power between servants and their less affluent employers. 'Mary's promised maid has jilted her, & hired herself elsewhere' (*Letters*, 24). Mary is her sister-in-law, evidently outbid for the services of a maid who knows her market value. The dismissal of servants is significant news. 'Mrs Digweed parts with both Hannah & old Cook, the former will not give up her Lover, who is a Man of bad Character, the Latter is guilty only of being unequal to anything' (*Letters*, 145).