



WHAT
MATTERS
IN
JANE
AUSTEN?



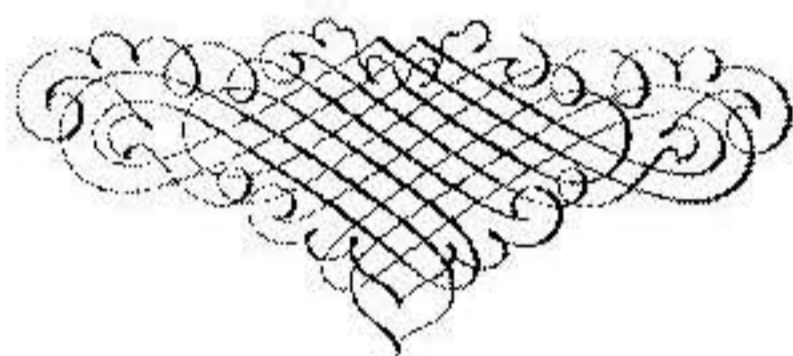
TWENTY CRUCIAL
PUZZLES SOLVED



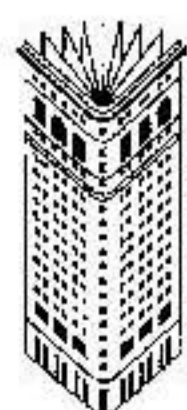
JOHN MULLAN

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

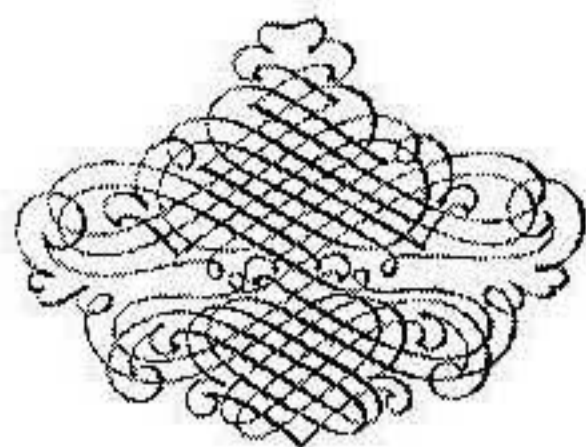
823'.7—dc23

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.



FOUR

How Do Jane Austen's Characters Look?

'She is a sort of elegant creature that one cannot keep one's eyes from. I am always watching her to admire ...'

Emma, II. iii

Jane Austen aficionados like to share their mild outrage at the casting in some of the many film versions of her novels, especially the casting of the actresses who play the heroines. Sometimes this is prompted by the film-makers' provocative neglect of Austen's characterisation – the choice, for instance, of Billie Piper, energetic action girl, as Fanny Price in an ITV *Mansfield Park* – but often the offence is a matter of looks. Could Gwyneth Paltrow be Emma, as she was in the 1996 Hollywood film? Her accent was less a worry than her looks. Not only the wrong-coloured eyes (blue instead of Emma's 'true hazle') but also a willowy frame that seemed not to match Austen's insistence on her heroine's physical robustness. And how could the thin and delicate Keira Knightley be chosen for Elizabeth Bennet, famous for her three-mile walk down lanes and across loamy fields? Such casting is often an affront to our presuppositions about how Austen's heroines look. The

allfront is telling, for these presuppositions are founded on so much that is only implicit in the novels themselves. We do not know, for instance, even the colour of these heroines' hair. How people look is often suggested rather than specified in Austen's novels. Why should she not tell us?

Perhaps because she would have us, like Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, imagine an attractive woman to meet our own requirements: 'Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you.'¹ But Austen wants us to think not so much about how characters look, but how they look to each other. Her sparing use of specification when it comes to looks is striking when looks can be so important. Think of the Bennet girls, who must rely on their personal attractions to win them some kind of financial security and social standing. When Jane Bennet becomes engaged to Mr Bingley her mother exclaims, with embarrassing glee and yet also honesty, 'I was sure you could not be so beautiful for nothing!' (*Pride and Prejudice*, III. xiii). There is the sense confessed quietly throughout Austen's narrative that looks are hugely important (thus those words used so frequently about characters when we first meet them: handsome, pretty, gentlemanlike, elegant). Austen herself is too honest not to mention a character's looks when he or she is introduced to us. And yet there is often the sense for the reader that looks are difficult to catch, elusive, unspecifiable. This is partly because Austen wants to avoid the strained formulae of other novels. For most novelists of Austen's age and earlier, a heroine's looks belong with her predictable parcel of virtues. In the first chapter of a novel that Jane Austen certainly read, Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1810), we find that the heroine, Laura Montreville, is possessed of 'consummate loveliness', 'cheerful good sense' and 'matchless simplicity'. There

is a ready vocabulary of superlatives for any novel heroine, for her virtues and for her attractiveness. Austen needed to escape such a vocabulary, and thus came her interest in the indefinability of some of her most important characters' looks. (One of her tricks is to save her precise descriptions for minor characters.)

The elusive qualities of Elizabeth Bennet's looks are explicitly discussed in *Pride and Prejudice*, taken up by Mr Darcy when he responds to Miss Bingley's sarcasm about adding her to the portraits in Pemberley: "... what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes?" "It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression, but their colour and shape, and the eye-lashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied" (I. x). The difficulty of catching the 'expression' of Elizabeth's eyes is evidence of their beauty, and the detection of this difficulty is proof of Mr Darcy's attraction to her. Later he talks to Elizabeth about her trying to 'sketch' his 'character', and she talks of trying to 'take your likeness', as if the most appreciative judges of other people – especially other people to whom they may be attracted – are those who know how hard it is to render a likeness.

Elizabeth's eyes in *Pride and Prejudice* captivate Mr Darcy. We remember finding out in Chapter vi that she does not please Mr Darcy's taste. 'But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.' That 'made it clear to himself' is wonderfully satirical: he convinces himself against the pressure of an unstated allure. The eyes have him. Mr Darcy's judgement also alerts us to the feature of a woman that we are most likely to find out about throughout Austen's fiction. We are told of Anne Elliott's 'mild dark eyes', and of Fanny Price's 'soft light eyes' (to be preferred by

any properly discerning male judge to Mary Crawford's 'sparkling dark ones'). Catherine Morland's eyes are not specifically described like this, though in the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey* we are told of her transformation from tomboy to 'interesting' young woman, how, as she grows through her teens, 'her eyes gained more animation'. Marianne Dashwood's eyes naturally reveal her personality, but also have an unusual colour that makes her allure singular: 'in her eyes, which were very dark, there was a life, a spirit, an eagerness which could hardly be seen without delight' (I. x).