



Jane Austen's WORLD

The Life and Times of England's Most Popular Author



Published to commemorate the
200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*

MAGGIE LANE

DEDICATION

*To Peter Troy
who found out more about Jane Austen
than he ever thought he wanted to know*



THIS IS A CARLTON BOOK

Design copyright © 1996, 2013 Carlton Books Limited

Text copyright © 1996, 2013 Maggie Lane

First published 1996

This edition published by Carlton Books Limited 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers and copyright holder.

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

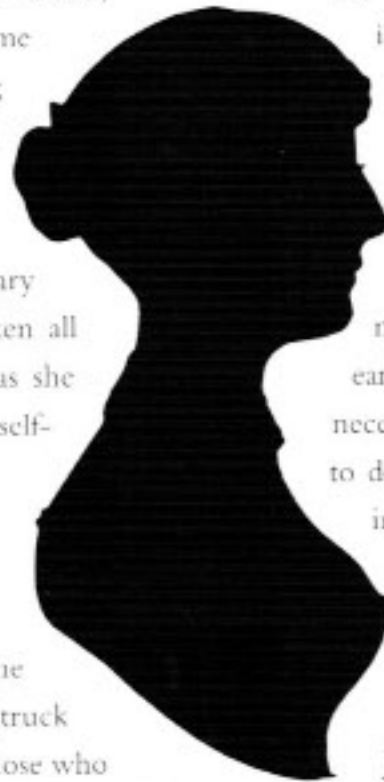
ISBN 978 1 78097 287 9

Printed and bound in Dubai

The Woman

SILHOUETTE, PROBABLY
OF JANE AUSTEN,
c. 1802.

As Jane Austen's fame spread and grew after her death, people who had known her were called on to record their impressions. More casual, passing references to her have also come down to us in letters written during her lifetime by family members and slight acquaintances. These sources supplement what we know or surmise of her from the primary evidence of her own writings. Taken all together, they reveal Jane Austen as she developed from a gifted child to a self-aware and complex woman.



Appearance

We know quite a lot about Jane Austen's appearance and how it struck others. All the descriptions left by those who knew her tally in certain particulars. She was tall and slim, with curly dark brown hair, large round hazel eyes and – what people tended to notice most – an exceptionally high colour in her cheeks. In her youth she seems to have been accounted a very pretty girl, her looks enhanced by a glow of health, animation of figure, and eyes that must often have been sparkling with fun.

Unfortunately these are not charms that always outlive carefree youth. In Jane Austen's case it seems they did not. The anxieties and frustration experienced in her late twenties seem to have robbed her early of her looks. The tall thin figure became a little unbending: "a poker" was the description attached to her by somebody who knew her slightly later in life. Her small mouth was apt to look pinched, and it is not difficult to imagine an

expression in those piercing bright eyes that people might find intimidating. Her family continued to see "cheerfulness, sensibility and benevolence" in her expression, because she loved them and was relaxed in their company. To strangers she presented a typically spinsterish look. Both Jane and her sister wilfully encouraged this image by taking to the garb of middle age – most notably the wearing of caps indoors – much earlier than their nieces, for example, thought necessary. One wonders why the sisters chose to do this; presumably it was to fend off the indignity of seeming to remain in the marriage market beyond their time.

Character

Jane Austen was born with a sunny temperament, inherited from her father. With the exception of her eldest brother, who suffered from melancholy, all of the Austen children were of cheerful disposition, affectionate, intelligent and lively; but among them Jane was particularly playful and demonstrative of her feelings. Though she could be shy with strangers, at home her cleverness, openness and high spirits must have made her a delightful child. For the first twenty five years of her life she appears to have been as consistently happy as her own creation Emma Woodhouse. Adulthood brought depth and shade to her character. Her comic vision of life and literature did not leave her, but delight in the ridiculous became something more measured and controlled. Her playfulness was subdued; she learnt to take life seriously in these middle years. She

remained capable of great tenderness of heart – toward her family, toward the creatures of her imagination – but her acute critical faculties were used now to confront not the absurdities of literature, but the the real and sometimes painful facts of existence.

In the final, fulfilled years of her life she managed to regain much of her old equilibrium and contentment, though the new sombreness of spirit was not far beneath. Her niece Anna Austen Lefroy remembered her in maturity as being less uniformly cheerful than her sister. Not a moody woman, she was nevertheless capable of different moods:

Her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous inclined her to play with the trifling commonplaces of everyday life, whether as regarded people or things; but she never played with its serious duties or responsibilities – when she was grave she was very grave.

This is what we would expect of a woman who thought deeply about life.

Jane Austen and her heroines

Although all the heroines are highly individual and none is an attempt at self-portraiture, some do possess characteristics and attitudes that seem to derive from their author.

ELIZABETH BENNET: "It was her business to be satisfied – and certainly her temper to be happy." Witty, spirited Elizabeth Bennet has more of the youthful Jane Austen in her than any other heroine. "As delightful a creature as ever appeared in print," was her author's verdict.

EMMA WOODHOUSE: "A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing and will see nothing which does not answer." By giving a playful imagination to her faulty heroine Emma, Jane Austen explores something of her own novelist's cast of mind. Jane Austen called Emma "a heroine whom no-one



JANE AUSTEN'S NIECE ANNA LEFROY WHO CHERISHED VIVID RECOLLECTIONS OF HER AUNT.

but myself will much like" – though readers do.

ANNE ELLIOT: "Saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments." This is not arrogance, it is proper self-esteem, in which Jane Austen's most mature heroine – though "almost too good for me," – surely resembles her creator.

ANNE ELLIOT, WHOSE "ELEGANCE OF MIND AND SWEETNESS OF CHARACTER" RESEMBLE JANE AUSTEN.

