



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*



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Beliefs and Values

JANE AUSTEN WAS A DIDACTIC NOVELIST – that is, one who created her imaginary worlds not only for the delight of creation, but to put forward certain moral values. Part of her purpose in writing was to be a good influence on her readers and therefore, in some small way, on her society. Without such a purpose, she would have thought the writing of fiction sheer self-indulgence, a childish pleasure to be given up on reaching a responsible age.

A practical Christianity

The moral that runs through all Jane Austen's novels is that we should control our own selfish impulses, be regardful of other people's feelings and make the best of whatever life happens to bring us. These were precepts taught to her in childhood and practised, as far as possible, by all the Austens as a religious duty. Jane Austen was brought up in the Church of England during one of its most serene periods, and she appears to have suffered no crisis of faith. Hers was a practical Christianity, a left-over from the eighteenth-century, focused more on living decently as a member of society than on the individual's

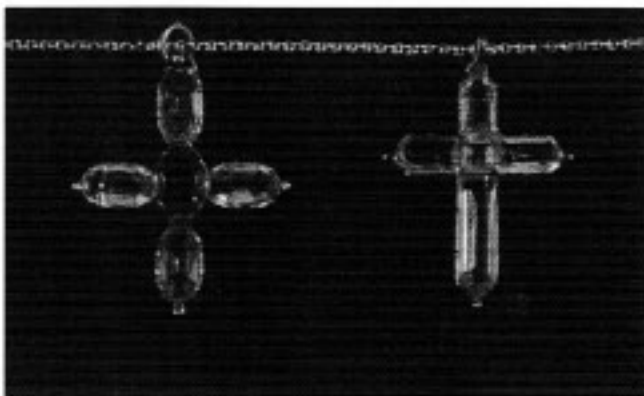
relationship with God. Among her writings is one prayer, in which she seeks God's help in judging other people less harshly and herself more severely. In her novels, the characters who incur their author's disapproval are almost all careless of the comfort of the people among whom they happen to live. For Jane Austen, there was hardly an obligation stronger than the exercise of self-control in the interests of

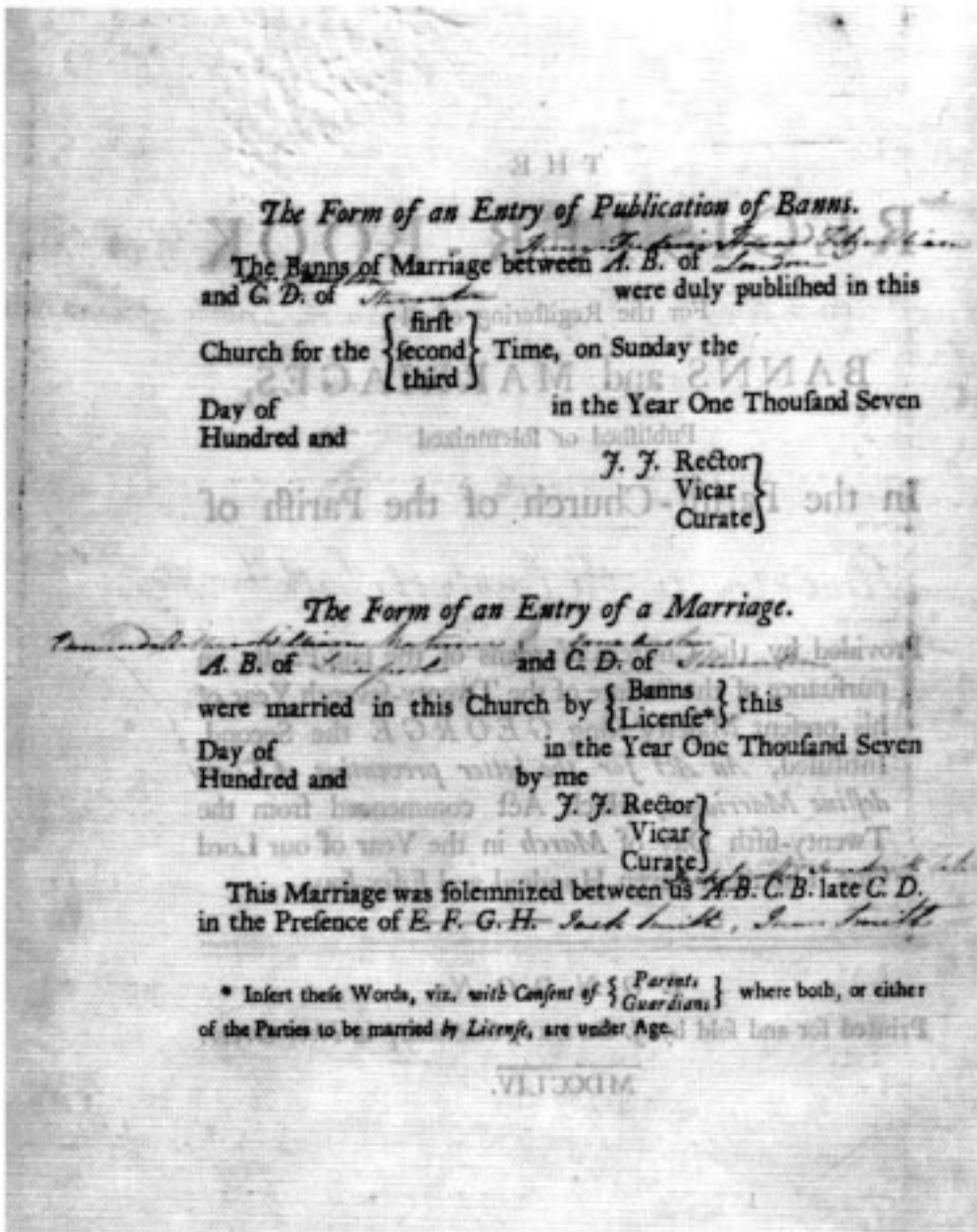
social and domestic harmony. Although there are very few references to religion in the novel it does in fact underpin all the efforts of the worthy characters to know their duty and behave with decency.

Snobbery

Jane Austen has sometimes been accused of being a snob. This misconception probably arises because she deals only with a certain level of society. Servant and members of the labouring classes appear in her novels only as adjuncts to the protagonists, never as individualized characters. We simply have to accept that what interested Jane Austen was the kind of subtle moral dilemma that only people with leisure and education were likely to confront. The most shocking snob in the novels is Emma Woodhouse – particularly shocking because otherwise there is so much that is good and lovable about her. But Emma is at fault in her assessments of other people, and we are not expected to share her view. The correct attitude is that of Mr Knightley, whose respect and friendship for Robert Martin his tenant farmer, and William Larkin his farm bailiff, are among his many attractive qualities. By the end of the novel, Emma has at least partially acknowledged the error of her ways. The other snobs in the novels are incorrigible and Jane Austen has no time for them. They include the cold-hearted pair Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood; Fanny's mother Mrs Ferrars; Sir Walter Elliot and two of his three daughters; and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Simply to name these characters is to realize how little Jane Austen sympathized with snobbish views. Lady Catherine's attempt to exact from Elizabeth Bennet a promise not to accept

TOPAZ CROSSES
GIVEN TO JANE AND
CASSANDRA BY
THEIR YOUNGEST
BROTHER CHARLES.





JANE AUSTEN’S SPOOF ENTRIES IN HER FATHER’S REGISTER OF MARRIAGES.

author’s part, as she proves by her praise of the younger generation of Prices. Their sterling qualities, as Sir Thomas Bertram himself reflects at the end of the novel, have been formed by “the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure”. There could hardly be a less snobbish assessment than that.

Money and materialism

Though Jane Austen valued the elegancies of life that money could buy, nothing was as important to her as human affection. Once, staying in a wealthy household, she contrasted the French wine drunk there

Mr Darcy is based on nothing but snobbery for Lady Catherine makes no allowance for Elizabeth’s personal qualities. Every reader rejoices when Elizabeth fails to be cowed.

The accusation of snobbery is also sometimes made against Jane Austen in connection with the Portsmouth scenes in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny Price loses all her romantic illusions about her old home in the back streets of Portsmouth and before the end of the week is longing to return to the elegant style of living at Mansfield Park. Fanny deplores the slovenly ways of her parents and can find no love in her heart for them. Some readers find this as shocking as Emma’s outrageous views. But the animus against the Price household is not snobbery on their

with the home-made wine of her own home: “Luckily the pleasures of Friendship, of unreserved Conversation, of similarity of Taste & Opinions, will make good amends for Orange Wine”.

Jane Austen’s own strong wish of earning money was not avarice – she spent nothing of what she earned – but the desire not to be a burden on her brothers, who had families of their own. While only too aware of the dreadfully precarious position of women without money in her society, she consistently deplores marriage without love. At the same time, she is no advocate of marriage unless there is enough money to live on. In Jane Austen, both prudence and the impulses of the heart must be in balance.