

## The Colors on Jane Austen's Palette

### Understanding Austen: Key Concepts in the Six Novels

By Maggie Lane.

Robert Hale, 2012. 208 pages.

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Review by Meg Levin.

At first glance, this book's table of contents suggests a Regency self-improvement guide. There are chapters on elegance, propriety and decorum, gentility, and openness and reserve. But what Maggie Lane is exploring is how Jane Austen uses a particular family of abstract nouns. As Lane acknowledges, she is by no means the first to study Austen's language. However, her subject is quite specific. Lane examines the words used for concepts that concern "the finer points of character and behavior"—concepts that constitute the "lexicon of moral and humane values" guiding Austen's characters. "Her philosophy and deepest-held convictions are embedded in this group of words and we get most out of her books if we grasp their full meaning."

Some of the seventeen chapters focus on a single concept (temper, delicacy); some on contrasting pairs (openness and reserve, reason and feeling); some on triples that share a family resemblance (firmness, fortitude and forbearance; sense, sensibility and sentiment). Related words are introduced and subtle differences marked, with numerous textual illustrations. For example, "[Firmness, fortitude and forbearance]... are linked by a sense of resoluteness, steadfastness, quiet inner strength. But whereas fortitude and forbearance are always to be admired in Jane Austen's moral universe, firmness is more liable to misapplication." Firmness is sticking to principle or to a decision, but, as Henry Tilney remarks, "to be always firm is to be sometimes obstinate." Louisa Musgrove finds out the hard way that firmness can be overdone.

Forbearance amounts to exercising "self-restraint in the interests of harmony between people who have to rub along in close proximity." Anne Elliot and Elinor Dashwood are exemplars of forbearance. Emma Woodhouse is displeased with her brother-in-law's "want of respectful forbearance towards her father." But Emma herself should forbear making a cruel joke at Miss Bates's expense.

"Fortitude is the mental or moral strength to stick to one's principles or bear difficulties whatever blandishments are on offer." This trait applies to longer-lasting situations, such as Elinor Dashwood's keeping Lucy Steele's secret, or Fanny Price's resisting pressure to take part in the play and to accept Henry Crawford.

Lane cites numerous passages from across the canon, assuming, no doubt correctly, that her readers will not need the particular novels identified. But unless you have memorized the texts, some of the quotations will surprise you. And unless you own Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, you will be puzzled by some of the words. Some are still in use, but their meanings have changed substantially. Others have fallen out of use altogether.

First, consider candour. Nowadays it means frankness or blunt (even brutal) honesty. Dr. Johnson defines it as being "free from malice, not desiring to find fault." Lane explains that for Austen it means "generosity in forming judgements of other people." Jane Bennet is the character who personifies candour as she bends over backward to think well of people. Frank Churchill, on the other hand, benefits from candour, as the narrator informs us: "he was judged throughout the parishes... with great candour; liberal allowances were made..." He is still relying on it when he writes to Mrs. Weston: "I know [my explanation] will be read with candour and indulgence."

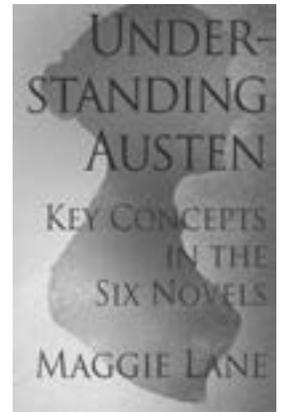
In contrast, a word that has entirely fallen out of use is gentility. This is not surprising since it emerged from a society

sharply divided into classes. Originally, a man was a gentleman if he was "well-born." By Austen's time, education and manners played a role as well. Mr. Knightley refers to Robert Martin as "a respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer." Indeed, the well-born could be faulted when they lacked such manners. "How else can Elizabeth Bennet so justly upbraid Darcy, one of the highest-born characters in the novels...for his insulting proposal: 'It spared me the concern I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner'?"

The book ends, amusingly, with the word *nice*, a word that once did respectable work in denoting neatness, precision, or fastidiousness. Not just Henry Tilney but countless others have condemned it for descending to convey just very vague approval, but the word has cheekily refused to reform itself.

*Understanding Austen* is informative, entertaining, and thought provoking; the book is a pleasure to read. The concepts discussed "are the colours on [Jane Austen's] palette, the threads in her workbasket, out of which each one of her novels is fashioned." Thanks to Maggie Lane for illuminating the particular words used in the novels, so we can see the finished products more clearly.

Two comments about the book's design: First, exact quotes from Austen that use the crucial words are given in boldface—a good choice. The chapter headings, however, are in an eccentric font that is hard to read—a poor choice.



Meg Levin is a member of JASNA-NY Metro and Clinical Professor of Philosophy at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University in New York City.