



Misreading Jane Austen: Henry James, Women Writers, and the Friendly Narrator

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A LEGION OF JANE AUSTEN'S READERS would agree when Malcolm Bradbury observes that Jane Austen, "a great artist working in a small compass," has constructed a reader who can recover from her novels an experience of life "as serious and intense as even Henry James could wish for" (186). However, Henry James would not have agreed. Though he assigned to her a high rank among novelists, saying that she is "shelved and safe for all time," "close to reality," and that "the tissue of her narrative is close and firm," he spoke patronizingly of her unconscious wool-gathering, criticized the absence in her works of striking examples of composition, distribution, and arrangement, and called her heroines "she-Philistines." One is surprised by these severe criticisms of the novelist he called "dear old Jane Austen," who devised and practiced literary techniques that he later developed. Why did Austen fail to win a perceptive reader like James who was so indebted to her? An examination of James's view of women writers and Austen's narrative technique, and of the relation of these two factors to Henry James's criticisms of Jane Austen, will enable us to better understand James's comments on his great predecessor.

In a letter of 8 April 1883, James wrote to the publisher of

The Bostonians that he felt “the most salient and peculiar point in our social life” is “the situation of women, the decline in the sentiment of sex, the agitation in their behalf” (*Notebooks* 20). James’s view of women was influenced by his father. Though Henry James, Sr., wrote that woman is the “perfect flower and fruit” of “human progress in interior invisible realms of being” (Anderson 127), he adhered to the conservative Victorian view—shared by many male Victorian writers—that women were best employed in those realms, perhaps in the roles of mother and wife. What James inherited from his father was an ambivalent view of women. His conservatism with regard to the appropriate political status of women is revealed by his response to his friend Violet Hunt when she asked him to sign a petition in support of women’s suffrage. He declined, saying, “I confess I am not eager for the *avènement* of a multitudinous and overwhelming female electorate—and don’t see how any man in his senses can be” (Rowe 268). He criticized George Sand because she lacked “wifely submissiveness” (*French Poets* 160). *The Bostonians* has been called James’s deconstruction of the women’s movement (Fabi 1-18).

On the other hand, James’s heroines often are vessels of feeling who strive to expand their consciousness. Rowe says that James’s ability to represent the “complex psychology of women” is to be attributed to his identification with their “marginal and powerless situations” (90). Others have observed that the feminine loomed large in James’s psyche, and one recalls his close friendships with a number of women. The result was the appearance in James’s novels of charming heroines like Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver, who win the sympathy of the reader as they strive for a more enlightened consciousness.

Widespread prejudice against women writers forced George Eliot and the Brontë sisters to resort to masculine pseudonyms. This prejudice probably influenced Jane Austen’s nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, who in his *Memoir* presented her as a retiring lady who was quite diffident about her instinctive talent (Wilkes 39-45; Johnson 143-163). Publication of the *Memoir* in 1871 gave impetus to the growing cult of Janeism, a fellowship of admirers of Jane Austen who held that admiration of that writer was praiseworthy while lack of admiration was a reprehensible

error in taste and judgment. Janeism provided a means of taking the offensive against male chauvinism. Rampant in the latter part of nineteenth-century England, Janeism was naturally irritating to male Victorian writers, nearly all of whom, judged by twentieth-century standards, would fall into the category of male chauvinists. James expressed his irritation, commenting that interest in Jane Austen has been driven up by “publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their ‘dear,’ our dear, everybody’s dear Jane so infinitely to their material purpose” (“Balzac” 62). James says that “she sometimes, over her work basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing room of other days, fell a-musing and her dropped stitches . . . were afterwards picked up as little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination” (63). The patronizing tone of these comments is a parody of a statement found in the *Memoir*: “the same hand which painted so exquisitely with the pen could work as delicately with the needle” (99). His reaction to Janeism no doubt intensified James’s view of Austen’s novels as only “women’s writing” (Wilkes 39-56).

James reveals his distaste for “women’s writing” in many of his essays. In “Gustave Flaubert” he praises the style of Flaubert, saying that his novels provide “a little oasis” in “the dreary desert of fictional prose.” The part of the desert that is “of the complexion of our own English speech” lacks “any dream of a scheme of beauty” because “the novel is so preponderantly cultivated among us by women, in other words by a sex ever gracefully, comfortably, enviably unconscious . . . of the requirements of form” (206). In a letter to Grace Norton on 5 March 1873, he calls *Middlemarch* “a truly immense performance” and observes that it “raises the standard of what is to be expected of women. . . . We all know about the female heart; but apparently there is a female brain, too” (*Letters* 1: 351). In a review of *Middlemarch* he says that Will Ladislaw is “a woman’s man” whom “a masculine intellect of the same power as George Eliot’s would not have conceived with the same complacency” (262). He observes that Margaret Oliphant had “a simply feminine conception of literature” (Gale 478). He says of George Sand that she has style but no form and that she has a typically feminine “intellectual laxity” (*French Poets* 180-81).

Another important factor contributing to James's failure to become Austen's ideal reader was the manner in which she sought to create that reader. Austen's narrator sought to win the friendship of the reader by ironic characterization and commentary, then to intrigue the reader by the unfolding narrative, and finally to gratify the reader with a pleasing and satisfying denouement. The ironic commentary of Austen's narrator distances her from the heroine, who is often the subject of her ironic barbs. The ability to reconstruct these ironic jests persuades readers that they are "communing with a kindred spirit" who grants them the wisdom to reconstruct the irony and share secret truths (Booth 28); thus, readers are drawn closer both to the narrator and to the heroine. In *Emma*, when the narrator's irony makes the heroine a source of innocent merriment, the reader responds with sympathy.

Austen's use of this technique violated a principle that James felt to be essential for the new type of novel he was creating, which he took great pains to practice in his own fiction. He reveals in his prefaces and other essays that he felt that the novel as a work of art would be enhanced if it seemed to present a self-portrait of the center of consciousness. He called intrusions by the narrator "going behind" and said of authorial intrusions by Thackeray and Trollope, which call attention to the presence of the narrator and the artifice of the novel, that "such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me I confess a terrible crime" ("Art" 26). He took great pains to obscure the presence of the narrator in his own works and was pleased when he had succeeded.

Though Jane Austen seldom intrudes, her ironic commentary reveals her presence. Iréne Simon says that Austen treats her readers as equals who can distinguish between playfulness and mockery, for "hers was only the self-effacement of the polite hostess in a civilized society." Simon refers to Austen's "forthright manner," saying that she wants us to enjoy the spectacle she is going to unfold (239). James felt that this tactic damaged the illusion of reality, most important in his view in a work of art. He is irritated by the "forthright manner" of Austen's narrator, and his preconceived ideas about the way women's writing fails to color "the air with which [he as a] . . . painter of life . . . more or less unconsciously suffused his picture" ("Balzac" 70) prejudices his

criticism of Austen's works.

Many of James's criticisms deal with Austen's lack of form. He often expresses his idea of the primary importance of form in an artistic novel, as in a letter to Hugh Walpole on 19 May 1912, where he writes, "Form alone takes, holds, and preserves substance" (4: 619). In spite of his admiration of *Middlemarch*, in his review of that novel he implies that it is a mere chain of episodes, unconscious of the influence of a plan, without development of an organized composition "gratifying the reader with a sense of design" (259). In his essay "Gustave Flaubert" he praises that author's style and says that Austen was "instinctive and charming," but "for signal examples of what composition, distribution, arrangement can do, of how they intensify the life of a work of art, we have to go elsewhere" (207). He also speaks of her "light felicity" and says that she "hardly leaves us more curious of her process or of the experience in her that fed it than the brown thrush who tells his story from the garden bough" and, as noted above, he speaks of her lapsing into wool-gathering and picking up her "dropped stitches" as "little master-strokes of imagination" ("Balzac" 63).

Many readers have observed that Jane Austen had an intense interest in literary form. The form of *Emma* has been called fugal, and A. Walton Litz says that Jane Austen "applied to the novel the same liberal concepts of truth and imitation that her great contemporaries were applying to poetry and in doing so she anticipated the central arguments of James's classic essay 'The Art of Fiction'" (55). James's surprising failure to appreciate the intricate structure of *Emma* results from his predisposition to discount the possibility of finding composition, distribution, and arrangement in a novel by a woman, especially by a woman who employed such a forthright narrator. Form and an unobtrusive narrator were to him supremely important. James felt that in developing the center of consciousness technique he was writing a new type of novel in which character was the motivating force, an idea amply discussed in his prefaces to the New York edition of his works. Donatella Izzo says that the novels of Honoré de Balzac represented the climax of the realistic tradition and that in the twentieth century "the text reclaims its self-referential nature." *The Portrait of a Lady*,

she says, frees itself of mimesis, radically questioning “the possibility and very concept of a traditionally mimetic narrative,” emphasizing the importance of form (33–48). To James, Austen was a genius who wrote traditional realistic novels, but a writer whose narrator interfered with the illusion of reality by her friendly and forthright manner. Roger Gard comments that the novels of Jane Austen “in spite of the high economy of selection and elision carefully practiced” appear “to be straight representations of everyday reality,” and Henry James regarded them in just that way (164–65).

James often refers to Austen’s narrow scope, implicitly criticized in his comments about her “little touches of human truth” and “little master-strokes of imagination.” He also notes that she left much more untold than told even about the “confined circle in which her muse revolved,” and that “her testimony complacently ends” where “the pressure of appetite within us” begins—that is, with marriage (*The Critical Muse* 599). He speaks of “the narrowness of Miss Austen’s social horizon” and “the extraordinary vividness with which she saw what she did see.” After acknowledging the passion of Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot, he comments on the “front-parlor existence” of Austen’s heroines, whom he calls “she-Philistines” with “second-rate minds” in want of moral illumination (*Letters 2*: 422–23). In “The Lesson of Balzac” he asks why the reader of Jane Austen always finds herself sitting “quite resigned in an arrested spring” (71).

In criticizing Jane Austen’s narrow scope, James violates a principle stated in “The Art of Fiction”: one must grant the writer his choice of subject, confining criticism to discussion of what he makes of it. There James is responding to a statement of Walter Besant about the necessity of “adventure” in a novel. He humorously defends himself against an unknown critic who censures certain tales in which “Bostonian nymphs appear to have ‘rejected English dukes for psychological reasons’” (40). James pretends to be quite unable to identify the tale criticized, though of course he recognized it as his own “An International Episode.” In the same essay James says that Flaubert’s tale “Un coeur simple” “cannot be called a success,” but he defends the author’s right to choose a slight subject (36). Had James been alert to the possibility of a creative experience in reading Jane Austen, he would not have

launched the charge of narrowness against her.

James's concern about Austen's narrow scope is probably a by-product of a deeper concern. In "The Art of Fiction" he refers to the "shallow optimism" of many English novels (45), while elsewhere he refers to Jane Austen's "light felicity" ("Balzac" 62). In a letter to William Dean Howells on 30 March 1877, James observed that tragedy arrested his attention more than other things and said more to his imagination (2: 105). To his mother he wrote that he was unlikely to marry because he did not think highly enough of life. The dark future facing many of the characters at the close of James's novels suggests that he felt that a serious view of life must be a tragic view, an attitude to be contrasted with the narrator's light and ironic dismissal of tragedy near the close of *Mansfield Park*. Life was a tragedy to the man of feeling, a comedy to the woman of reason.

In spite of the ironic comedies of James's early and middle period, he was repelled by the comic revelations of Austen's friendly narrator. Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra on 4 February 1813, that *Pride and Prejudice* is "too light and bright and sparkling," and needs "a long chapter of sense" about some contrasting topic, like Bonaparte. *Emma* is less light and bright and sparkling, but it ends with a baby and three marriages. When Henry James with his preference for tragedy and his idea of the necessity of an imperceptible narrator encountered Austen's forthright, comic narrator, he probably was tempted to include the novel among the formless ones he derides for ending with "a distribution of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks," or like a good dinner with "a course of dessert and ices" ("Art" 27-28).

In a letter to Cassandra on 29 January 1813, Austen wrote, "I do not write for such dull elves / As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves," a parody of lines in *Marmion*. No reader of Henry James would claim that he is a dull elf lacking in ingenuity, but even an acute reader like James may fall short of the ideal if he does not read with sufficient care. James's care in reading was diminished by his irritation with Austen's narrator and by his biased view of women writers.

Austen's ironies require close attention to every word. When

the narrator of *Emma* says that Emma did just what she liked, “highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own” (5), readers of ironic vision, if they have observed the narrator’s signals in the first two paragraphs, recognize the ironic statement, but they have not yet learned enough about Emma to determine the appropriate severity of the criticism. In response, readers assign the degree of severity they feel to be appropriate and read on. But if in haste readers miss the adverbs, they may not even recognize the statement as ironic, and certainly will fail to appreciate the humor.

The tight construction of *Emma* and the alertness required to solve the mystery and understand the art of Austen in educating her readers is illustrated by the story of Jane and Frank. The clues, like the purloined letter, are hiding in plain sight—Frank’s repeated postponements of a visit to Highbury until Jane’s arrival, the evasiveness of both Frank and Jane when questioned about their acquaintance at Weymouth, the discussion of the post office, the timing of the arrival of the piano, Miss Bates’s chatter at the Crown—but these clues seem insignificant when encountered and are easy to overlook. The imperceptive reader shares Emma’s astonishment at the denouement of the episode, but the reader who has heeded the lesson in reading provided by the novel enjoys the pleasure of solving the mystery and negotiating the hermeneutic difficulty—the most significant pleasures to be derived from reading *Emma*. Thus, Carole Berger says, the reader is “implicated” in the moral and thematic concerns of the novel (531-44). And, of course, all readers, whether dull elves or acute critics, can enjoy these pleasures by reading the novel a second time.

The contretemps between Harriet and Emma resulting from their discussion of a potential, but unnamed, admirer to replace Mr. Elton in Harriet’s thought reveals another example of Austen’s art. Harriet thinks the unnamed person is Mr. Knightley, while Emma and the reader identify him as Frank Churchill. The result of the misunderstanding is entertaining for the reader, but painful for Emma and Harriet. It is such an incident as this one, perhaps, that Adena Rosmarin has in mind when she says that the reader of *Emma* is constantly misled by sympathy for Emma and

by the narrator's "ambiguity" (315-42). The episode does not actually seem to be ambiguous, because Austen lays a solid foundation for Harriet's attitude. Mr. Knightley has indeed been attentive to her. Though the reader who surmises Harriet's view would be a very penetrating one indeed, most readers enjoy the ironic comedy and pathos of this episode and of the denouement which follows.

Henry James was obviously a person of ironic vision and acute intelligence who could have appreciated Austen's ironies. But, distracted by his bias and his irritation, he failed to notice Austen's art. He did not attend Jane Austen's reading lesson, so he probably shared Emma's astonishment at the revelation of the relationship between Jane and Frank, and he missed the aesthetic pleasure of solving the hermeneutic difficulty. As Mary Waldron observes, Austen "enjoys exploiting the reflexes of her readers and means to disillusion us" (145). Had James made a study of Jane Austen's novels, he no doubt would have corrected his view.

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