



Jane Austen and the Labor of Leisure

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IN SOME WAYS, preparing to present the first version of this essay at the 2001 JASNA AGM was the hardest writing and thinking job I'd ever tackled. September 11's unspeakable events had shaken our world to its foundation in many ways. One such way, for me, involved a loss of professional confidence—not in how I did things but in whether they were worth doing at all. I was on the point of teaching *Mansfield Park* as the endless televised reiterations of the fiery, implosive end of the World Trade Center and lethal attack on the Pentagon, less publicized but more immediate to Virginians, monopolized campus attention. Administrative decree cancelled our classes for the day—but not before I'd pondered long, hard, and indecisively. To teach or not to teach? Jane Austen had never struck me as irrelevant, nor had her concentration on the minute particulars of one or two families in a rural neighborhood seemed evasive. But on 9/11 the ethic and aesthetic of *Mansfield Park* seemed remote indeed. Even the value of reading and teaching literature seemed debatable. As I imagined the heroic unselfishness of firefighters, rescue workers, and medical personnel in the ruins of lower Manhattan, it was sobering and humiliating to suspect that the most useful thing about me was my O-Negative blood—or would have been if in recent years I'd not spent too much time in the English countryside to be eligible to donate.

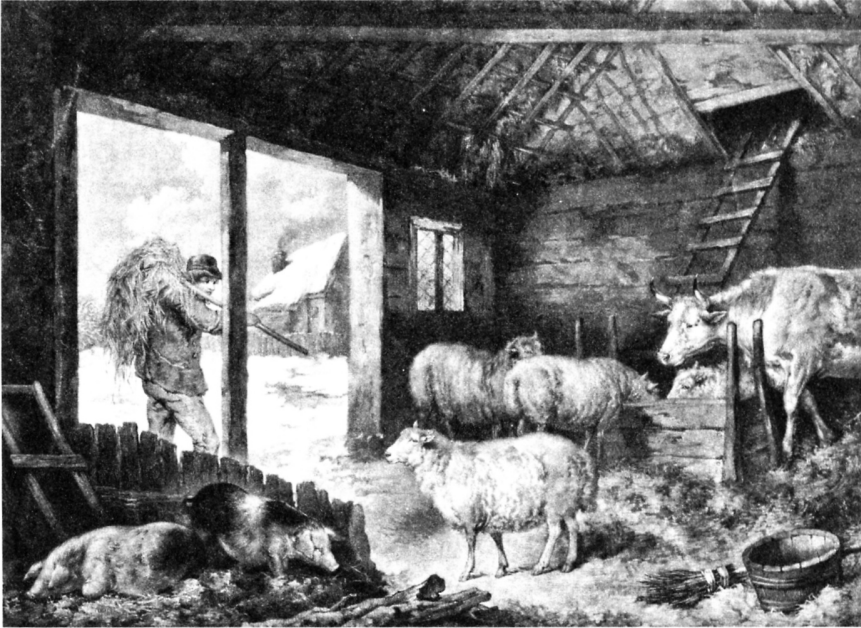
This feeling returns now and again. But its antithesis also makes itself known. Pressed to discern and articulate the validity of what I do and love, I'm

generally able to reaffirm my faith in something I once held to be self-evident: reading literature and discussing it with students is not fiddling while Rome burns. Studying the humanities is one of the best ways of cultivating clear thought, imagination, sympathy for people unlike ourselves, and moral judgment. We participate in a long conversation that aids in the nurture of qualities as necessary as blood in our sad world—or maybe even more necessary if, as the philosopher Josef Pieper has argued, leisure is one of the foundations of Western culture because it affords the necessary still moment for wonder and transcendence: “Be leisured, and know that I am God,” in the words of the Psalms verse that stands as epigraph to Pieper’s *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. So, I think in a more positive mood, I need not feel guilty about spending time with Austen while also and rightly concerned with campus violence, the economy, congressional malfunction, Afghanistan, Iraq. My scholarly vocation involves something authentic: an opportunity to cultivate the rewards of both labor and leisure.



That last phrase, you may have noticed, brings us to the advertised title of this essay. What am I getting at by those words “the labor of leisure” anyway? Well, it is a truth universally acknowledged that Austenworld—by which I mean the highly selective fictive milieu depicted within the confines of her novels—is a place where unmarried but marriageable young ladies develop or define their characters through interacting with eligible gentlemen, accepting or rejecting their proposals or waiting in vain for such offers, and finally committing themselves to specific communities, responsibilities, and values by taking someone’s hand in the ordering dance called matrimony. Inevitably, the interactions necessary for such evolving alliances take place among people at leisure—people at leisure together, which is leisure wearing its celebratory face rather than its philosophical aspect.

This is not to say that the Bennets and Darcys, Bertrams and Crawfords, Morlands and Tilneys, Elliots and Wentworths, Dashwoods and Ferrarses, Woodhouses and Knightleys and their peers are people whose lives are nothing but leisure. On the contrary. Jane Austen doesn’t offer us a gallery of well-heeled slackers. With some notable exceptions, such as Lady Bertram on her sofa with Pug and Mr. Woodhouse by his fire with a perfectly prepared bowl of gruel, Austen’s principal and even minor characters are not generally people who, if



Giles, *The Farmer's Boy*, after George Morland (1803). © Trustees of the British Museum.

living their lives responsibly, have nothing to do but entertain themselves. Rather, these characters, men and women who for the most part have been born into the landed classes or trained for the gentlemanly professions, are on-stage in Austen's mental theatre when they are at leisure. For the most part, the practical responsibilities of their lives are shunted offstage. Reading between the lines or extrapolating from brief suggestions, we can infer the manorial duties Mr. Knightley embraces and Mr. Crawford avoids, the practical concerns at which Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot excel and which their younger sisters Marianne and Mary ignore. But Austen's attention lights only in passing on such practical concerns, episodes in the *vita activa*, a philosopher might call them. Instead Austen dwells on interludes of leisure. These interludes, whether dances, card games, musical events, or excursions, are the prime sites of individual self-disclosure in her fictive world. The leisure scenes are memorable set pieces in which characters reveal things about themselves—things that allow both their fictive partners in leisure and Austen's readers to judge them. At leisure together, the characters build, through their words and silences, deeds and inactions, ephemeral communities that are far from irrele-

vant to the more enduring communities on which Austen's novels focus.

Let me go on to say that Austen's chosen focus poses a number of problems, both for her readers—those of us who devote ourselves to “the labor of leisure” in rather a different way from her characters—and for some of those characters. The apparent inconsequentiality of the pastimes and preoccupations depicted in Austen's novels alienates some readers—especially, in my teaching experience, young male American readers, a demographic group rather generally resistant to Austenworld's charms. “Dude,” goes the exasperated engineering major in my *Mansfield Park* class, “why does Austen spend so much time on Fanny Price's jewelry choices? What does it matter whether she wears Henry's necklace, Edmund's chain, William's cross, or none of them?” I facetiously reply that the young engineer might take at least a structural interest in the logistics of accessorizing—but seriously, I recognize that it's hard for him to do even that without accepting Austen's way of operating. To value her fiction, we must share her premise that moral truths underlie apparently trivial choices. In the absence of such a shared assumption, my student's point has its relevance.

So does the objection of the earnest young woman wearing a “Free Tibet” t-shirt. This student thinks it might be more important to know precisely what Sir Thomas is up to on his estates in Antigua than to immerse ourselves in the details of amateur theatricals back home at Mansfield Park. I can explain that Jane Austen wrote what she knew at first hand, and that her range of directly observed experience did not include the Caribbean colonies and how British landowners ran their estates there. I can indicate how Sir Thomas's need to be away in Antigua rises out of carefully specified economic imperatives on the homefront. I can even explain why, unlike some post-colonial critics and the maker of a recent film adaptation of the novel, I suspect that Sir Thomas, unlike many or most Antigua property-holders of his time, may not have been a slave-owning planter.

But the evidence to be cited is subtly underplayed, a bit of passing conversation about the slave trade in Chapter Three of Volume Two. Fanny, a strong but sensitive moral barometer if there is one in Austenworld, has just mentioned to Edmund that “I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies” (197). Edmund goes on to say that Fanny should speak up more in such conversations. Fanny replies, “But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?” (198). Then Edmund: “I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther” (198). Now it

seems to me that in the high-minded, rather self-righteous milieu of Mansfield Park, neither Fanny nor Sir Thomas would take much pleasure in a discussion of the slave trade if they both were in fact beneficiaries of it. But I'm working by inference here: we have no transcript of the conversation. And, as Fanny's next remark to Edmund shows, her pursuit of this interesting and significant topic is squelched by her relentlessly impeccable manners and her timid self-consciousness. She responds, "And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel" (198).

You can imagine that my explication of this scene might, if possible, frustrate my earnest student even farther. Jane Austen has dangled before us the possibility of serious discussion of an important contemporary issue by thoughtful characters—only to drop it by making her heroine too scrupulous to seem a showoff. It can seem that manners, not morals, silence Fanny. Similarly, family dynamics and the etiquette of genteel conversation preoccupy Austen's narrator—at the expense of a larger and arguably more compelling social and ethical issue. In choosing to dwell on the manners and domestic morality of Mansfield Park, rather than the political and economic morality of slavery in the West Indies, Austen signals an authorial commitment to making the labor of leisure the primary incident of her novel—though of course there is such a thing as a speaking silence, and the silence on Antigua resonates ambiguously.

If Austenworld's preoccupation with pastime is hard on certain categories of readers, it also poses problems for some of its fictive inhabitants. Certain characters, obnoxious, deplorable, or shallow-seeming in the leisured circumstances that surround them, might show more positive aspects in situations calling for active labor. For instance, we might recall the *Mansfield Park* narrator's concise but heavily packed comparative assessment of the three Ward sisters. Speaking first of the feckless, incompetent Mrs. Price, cursed with a leisure-class temperament in an environment that calls for grinding labor, the narrator observes, "She might have made just as good a woman of consequence as Lady Bertram, but Mrs. Norris would have been a more respectable mother of nine children, on a small income" (390). The last part of this comparison is the kindest thing said of the odious Mrs. Norris in the novel. The meddlesome, ungenerous, half-tyrannical and half-sycophantic Aunt Norris's practical, bustling, managerial nature appears at its worst at

Mansfield Park, where as clergyman's widow she has no proper duties of her own. Stretching a husband's modest pension, making a small, crowded, dirty house as comfortable and hygienic as possible, and promoting the advancement of numerous children might have called forth better aspects of her energetic nature: speaking biblically, she'd have been much better as a Martha than as a Mary. Similarly, in *Emma* the affable but lightweight Mr. Weston might strike readers as a more substantial man if we were able to observe him in the long process of earning back his place as a gentleman, working patiently to save up the purchase price for Randalls. During the years he spent in trade, Weston presumably displayed discipline, prudence, and forethought not called for or evident within the confines of the novel, where he's already acquired a country house—and, more recently, the exemplary wife to run it, put him at his ease, and make him look rather dim and indiscriminating by comparison.

Some Austen characters have plenty of important work to do within the temporal confines of the novels and do their duty admirably, but they appear at a disadvantage because their significant activities go on offstage—and because the leisure most generally depicted in Austen's novels is *social* leisure, not the solitary leisure in which, as Pieper argues, a thinking person cultivates his or her sense of wonder and ponders those things that transcend the contingencies of place, time, rank, and income. Let's take the most notable case of a man who would look better at work or at leisure in his study than in leisured society: Mr. Darcy. Do you agree with Elizabeth Bennet that he seems stuffy, awkward, and arrogant when dragged to a ball in her neighborhood, a milieu decidedly downmarket for him? If so, can you blame him? Darcy, the antithesis of his rival Wickham, is a man of substance, not style. Force him into elegant idleness among strangers, most of them aspiring social climbers, who include foolish fathers, predatory mothers, and vulgar daughters, and he freezes up. Darcy knows that an Austenworld country ball is at once nothing and everything—a shallow stream full of baited hooks for unwary gentlemen fish.

But if we or Elizabeth had a first view of Darcy attending to his duties at Pemberley, or reading and thinking in its well-stocked library, we'd be much quicker to grant him the admiration he deserves. On his estate, he'd manifest qualities that count for more than those attributes evident in a gossipy ballroom: his tall, fine figure, handsome face, fashionable air, large income, and high birth. Darcy's long letter of self-justification may change Elizabeth's mind about his merits, but it's eventually Pemberley that wins her heart—and less for crass material reasons than because Pemberley embodies Fitzwilliam Darcy's values. Pemberley gives form to his gentlemanly excellences. We see

them expressed in house, grounds, domestic responsibilities, and master-servant relations. But we never directly see Darcy shouldering those responsibilities. There are hints of his virtues as master of Pemberley, but his practical accomplishments lie outside the frame of the novel. Even his surprising metropolitan labors to find the fallen Lydia and contrive the marriage to a scoundrel that alone can save her reputation are reported at second hand.

In like manner, the hardworking male characters of *Emma*—the landowner George Knightley, his barrister brother John, and his Abbey Mill Farm tenant Robert Martin—would be more obviously admirable were we to see them at their labors or in their domestic environments rather than abroad or at leisure. Mr. Knightley, nonpareil though he is, would shine yet more brightly in his offstage acts of everyday kindness and competence, alluded to but not directly shown, than he does in the sitting-rooms, dining-rooms, and ballrooms of Highbury. John Knightley, a forthright, clear-thinking family man, would appear to far more advantage in his roles of barrister or *paterfamilias* than he does enduring Mr. Weston’s hospitality or Mr. Woodhouse’s offers of gruel. As for Robert Martin, an intelligent, hardworking, competent tenant highly valued by his landlord, it’s only in the arena of fashionable leisure that he seems wanting. Even a self-proclaimed imaginalist like Emma is perceptive and fair enough to recognize the well-crafted nature of his prose with a purpose: the letter of proposal to Harriet. That’s not a letter we are privileged to read, unfortunately—and to be sure, Robert Martin would very likely be Mr. Elton’s or Frank Churchill’s inferior in producing such verbal pastimes as charades or witty compliments. As a laboring character, he exists mainly on the workaday edge of portrayed scenes in a Highbury mostly at leisure.

My case has now come round to *Emma*, the novel that will occupy most of the rest of this talk. Like the men just discussed, the protagonist herself is a surprisingly hardworking young woman who would seem a much better person were we shown her offstage labors. It’s evident that she, the sole competent adult living at Hartfield, is like Mr. Knightley, someone with a house and estate (though a smaller one unencumbered by much land) to run; and the practical intricacies of managing Mr. Woodhouse are suggested and sometimes even dramatized. Emma’s patience, kindness, and success in this arena go far toward making her snobbery and bossiness more endurable. But her duties as first lady of Highbury go farther. They involve acts of charity, such as the visit to “a poor sick family” (83) that begins Chapter Ten. This visit is not shown, only reported:

They were now approaching the cottage, and all idle topics were

superseded. Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse. She understood their ways, could allow for their ignorance and their temptations, had no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those, for whom education had done so little; entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as good-will. In the present instance, it was sickness and poverty together which she came to visit; and after remaining there as long as she could give comfort or advice, she quitted the cottage with such an impression of the scene as made her say to Harriet, as they walked away,

“These are the sights, Harriet, to do one good. How trifling they make every thing else appear!—I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day; and yet, who can say how soon it may all vanish from my mind?” (86-87)

A backward glance at “the outward wretchedness of the place” with “still greater within” (87) shows Emma’s depth of feeling and empathy; but as she has candidly conjectured, the scene soon vanishes from her mind as the appearance of Mr. Elton brings matchmaking for Harriet—a truly “idle topic”—to the fore.

Although she might thereby seem more of a George Eliot heroine than a Jane Austen one, Emma would be a more immediately sympathetic character were we actually to see more of her charitable efforts, her practical ministry to the plebeian Highbury families she doesn’t “visit” on a social basis. In fact, she would be a better person if she used her leisure more for reflection than for society and had more work to do. But Emma’s main labor, as mistress of Highbury, is social leisure, and in the genteel circle comprised by Hartfield, Donwell, Randalls, and the vicarage, leisured pastimes provide Austen’s most reliable and plausible means of assembling all the characters. These scenes are fraught with import: they are the chief opportunities for the characters to reveal themselves to one another and to Austen’s readers, who must pay unremittingly close attention lest they miss something delicate but important. We might assess any number of scenes—the ball where Elton disrespects Harriet Smith and Knightley exalts her; the strawberry picking that features a Marie Antoinettish Mrs. Elton tricked out in all her “apparatus of happiness” (358); the Box Hill excursion, where deracination, idleness, and irritation combine to provoke Emma to forget social responsibilities of which she’d be well aware back in

Highbury. But a look at one depiction of collective leisure will suffice: let it be Emma's oblique, crafty, but unsuccessful attempt at matchmaking through the ladylike activity of portrait-sketching.

This interlude begins, as you will recall, with Emma showing an array of family portraits to Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton, with an eye toward creating a situation in which Elton is sanctioned to admire Harriet's nubile beauty and voice his admiration. The scene opens with the narrator's subtly nuanced and incisive judgment on the three principals' powers of discrimination. Emma, nearly honest in assessing her artistic expertise in private, does not mind the public taking her for more talented than she is: "She was not much deceived as to her own skill either as an artist or a musician, but she was not unwilling to have others deceived, or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved" (44).

We now move to the minds of Harriet and Elton as they view and admire Emma's drawings. But not before the narrator—perhaps still in the moral consciousness of Emma, perhaps not—concisely appraises those amateur drawings as they should be appraised. "There was merit in every drawing—in the least finished, perhaps the most; her style was spirited; but had there been much less, or had there been ten times more, the delight and admiration of her two companions would have been the same. They were both in extasies. A likeness pleases everybody; and Miss Woodhouse's performances must be capital" (44–45). It would be well worth unpacking the heavily ironized aesthetic implications of Emma's "spirited" amateur style, where the most merit may reside in the sketchiest piece of work. But the point is that for different moral reasons Elton and Harriet are alike in offering undiscerning approval. Their response here is not thoughtful praise but "extasy" independent of merit or its absence. The quasi-axiom characterizing their pronouncement sets up a scene where flattery, attempted manipulation, and misinterpretation will flow in all directions: "A likeness pleases every body; and Miss Woodhouse's performances must be capital."

When others of the Hartfield set join the group—Harriet ingenuously posing, Elton promiscuously praising, Emma trying to "throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance" (47)—we find more capacity for discernment. Again, though, we encounter characters whose leisured comments reveal their distinctive moral and critical styles. The trained eye and loving heart of Mrs. Weston respectively detect the lapse in fidelity and attribute it to the best of motives: "Miss Woodhouse has given her friend the only beauty she wanted" (47). Mr.

Knightsley's "You have made her too tall, Emma" (48) bluntly cuts to the chase and straightforwardly reveals the truth to the artist, who inwardly acquiesces but outwardly resists his pronouncement. Mr. Woodhouse demonstrates his inability to stray from his preoccupations—cautious valetudinarianism and uncritical love of his daughter. He knows no one who draws so well as Emma but regrets that Harriet is pictured "sitting out of doors, with only a little shawl over her shoulders—and it makes one think she must catch cold" (48).

Mr. Elton's interjected rejoinders to the other characters' observations are often grammatical fragments that bespeak their logical absurdity. Take for instance his rebuttal to Knightsley's accurate observation: "[N]ot in the least too tall. Consider, she is sitting down—which naturally presents a different—which in short gives exactly the idea—and the proportions must be preserved, you know. Proportions, fore-shortening!" (48). In style, syntax, and substance, Elton's comments consistently reveal his purpose to be blatant flattery—though his motives are less easily discernible, at least to the self-misled Emma. And his willingness to take the drawing to London for immediate framing shows him, a resident clergyman with parish duties, even more irresponsibly inclined to travel for trivial purposes than the visiting Frank Churchill seems to be when he claims to be going up to London for a haircut.

The leisure scene of Emma sketching Harriet sets forth in miniature the moral and intellectual habits and powers of this small segment of Highbury society. Similar litmus tests occur throughout the narrative, as leisure, interpreted by Austen's narrator and presumably by those characters capable of similar discernment, constitutes an arena for self-disclosure. But in Austen-world, leisure ends up being a means toward an end, not an end in itself—a narratological equivalent of Donwell Abbey's "broad short avenue of limes, which stretching beyond the garden at an equal distance from the river, seemed the finish of the pleasure grounds" (360). Continuing this description, the narrator says, "It led to nothing; nothing but a view at the end over a low stone wall with high pillars, which seemed intended, in their erection, to give the appearance of an approach to the house, which had never been there" (360). This pleasure walk is a literal dead-end, but it affords a "charming" view of rising ground well clothed with woods and, embraced by a "close and handsome" curve in the river, the Abbey Mill Farm, home of the Martins. Austen's nationalistic narrator bestows her accolade of adjectives upon this view pronounced "sweet to the eye and the mind": "English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive" (360).

Yes, the Highbury citizens who gaze at this sweet English view, that se-

lect set in whose company we are privileged to spend our time, are leisure-class people observed at play. But the leisured dignity of Donwell Abbey depends on the Abbey Mill Farm and similar sites of dignified labor. The qualities Emma and her peers reveal through their pastimes both inform and derive from the working world generally elided from the novel. Austen may depict leisure, but she implies the importance of labor. It is, I believe, no coincidence that her last completed novel's heroine, a mature woman rather than a marriageable girl, is shown more at work than at play. Anne Elliot's virtues emerge through daily acts of practical competence, kindness, and altruism—not through ornamental accomplishments. Even her piano playing is a service to others, dancers, rather than an opportunity for idle personal display. Anne loves the country, where she has both roots and responsibilities. She dislikes Bath, a place of unrooted social leisure. Despite her love of home and of country life, though, Anne recognizes that there are things yet more to be desired. When she commits the ultimate act of female self-definition in Austenworld, accepting a proposal, she turns her back on the aristocratic, landed, leisured classes and allies herself with a meritocratic, peripatetic profession: the hard-laboring British Navy.



It's impossible for those of us who have lived through the first decade of this millennium to forget that the terrible events of September 11, 2001, were followed by other dark episodes: far too many of them. Some of these shadows have come to be chronic, and others have specific dates attached to them: on my campus, there's April 16. But Austen's writing years encompassed public events—wars, economic woes, atrocities—that could challenge belief in the value of an individual sensibility enriched by the cultivation leisure allowed. Jane Austen didn't lose faith in either hard work or in personal leisure wisely deployed. We her readers can be glad that she didn't—and we can continually be inspired by her example.

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