

## Austen: Class and Politics

Morris, Pam. *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Caution: some of this discussion contains minor spoilers.

Questions as to the proper nature of social relations and political settlements were central concerns within eighteenth-century British Enlightenment. Austen was rooted in that interrogative mode of thinking but she was writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and, importantly, after the publication of Edmund Burke's influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke's romantic idealism produced a powerfully imagined vision of an immemorial England, sustained by hierarchical traditions of patrician and religious ideals.

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National sentiment, Burke claimed, is nurtured in the small 'platoon' of childhood and that early reverence for local attachments expands and cements the ties of gratitude, benevolence and obedience that secure the unity of the nation. This ideal appealed powerfully to public reaction and anxiety in the wake of the Revolution and has retained a central place ever since in conservative concepts of English national identity.

A sense of privileged English destiny was much enhanced during the time Austen was writing *Emma* by the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 and the conclusion of a quarter of a century of continental wars. It was a momentous event. It requires an act of historical imagination now to comprehend what the removal of that constant threat to national safety must have felt like at the time to all shades of public opinion. The *Edinburgh Review* expresses something of the immense relief to people's spirits and the sense of renewed social possibilities for the nation when it speaks of 'the enchanting prospect of long peace and measureless improvement' at last opening up. The journal goes on, this scene that has 'burst on our view' has arrived 'like the balmy air and flushing verdure of late spring after the dreary chills of a long and interminable winter'. [...]

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The celebratory spirit marking the end of the Napoleonic wars gave powerful impetus to popular rhetorical representations of England as a united community or family, but these imagined identities were always politically inflected. Two opposing ideas of national identity struggled for legitimacy of representation. The conservative *Gentleman's Magazine* rejoiced that bread, meat and drink were so distributed that in every town and almost every village, people were able to participate 'in the general joy and to keep the feast of peace, as one united family'. The naturalising image of nation as a family constitutes the country as a benign organic hierarchy. Patronage of the poor by the rich, in the form of food and drink, was seen by conservatives as engendering those feelings of gratitude and benevolence that cemented the bonds of social unity. Within this ideal of nationhood, the privilege of rank and its bestowal of favours were viewed as essential for the maintenance of civility, cultivation and social order. In 1814, for example, the *Gentleman's Magazine* published a letter deprecating the violent changes that had occurred to the internal structure 'of ranks in old England'. As the nostalgic reference to 'old England' suggests, the writer is hostile to what he sees as the growing importance of commerce and the City fostered by the administration of William Pitt. The new men, the writer claims, have 'ousted the old Country gentlemen [. . .] and shoved them into insignificance'. Another writer to *Gentleman's Magazine* even blamed a rise in suicide on 'this attempt to overthrow the bounds of society that have hitherto kept ranks of society distinct, and to confound

and mix all that ought to have been kept separate'. Those who feared such social and political confusion tended to look to Edmund Burke's powerful advocacy of rank and deference as the only sure foundation of national identity and as bulwark against social anarchy.

Not all imaginings of the nation as a unity were so opposed to change. As the *Edinburgh Review* claimed, peace brought with it possibilities of 'measureless improvements'. Progressive opinion welcomed the ending of war as offering the opportunity for a widening of participation in the public and political activities that, in effect, constituted a more inclusive ideal of national identity. In *British Society 1680–1880*, historian Richard Price writes, 'The French Revolution allowed the unthinkable to be imagined in politics.'

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It was for this reason that from the 1790s the boundaries of the politically (and socially) possible were continually tested and stretched.' The revolution, Price argues, put reform irrevocably on the agenda, 'largely because the French Revolution had extended the possibilities for the role of "the people" in the political nation'. The question of who was recognised within perceptions of England as a nation became a matter of contestation. It was a moment of potential dissensus, to use Jacques Rancière's term, when Burke's vertical exclusivity of rank was challenged by an emergent horizontal regime making visible and audible those formerly regarded as beneath notice. The Liberal *Edinburgh Review*, for example, argued that the whole revolutionary period had demonstrated that national prosperity and security rest upon 'expressing and giving effect to the general sense of the community'. The question of Catholic emancipation much debated in the public sphere during 1813 was also expressed, by those in favour of reform, as encouraging 'expanded affections which embrace the whole community in one system of fair and equal legislation, by which the several parts of the social body shall be as it were amalgamated into an harmonious whole'.

Both the above quotations are implicitly drawing upon a widely recognised sense that a literate public opinion had developed rapidly during the latter part of the eighteenth century and was continuing to extend its social boundaries. This expanding community of the informed and literate, 'the people', was a strengthening presence within national life. In *Emma*, the young tenant farmer, Robert Martin, provides a fictional illustration of the new class of citizen. Emma dismisses Robert Martin as having nothing to do with the public realm of books although he is actually well-informed and well-read. Emma's initial response, here, in refusing to 'notice' Martin, voices the traditional regime of the perceptible in which those of lower rank are rendered mute and invisible within a tightly-circumscribed, elite perception of who constitutes England.

Nevertheless, in the real world, despite reactionary views like those of Emma,<sup>1</sup> there were increasing voices in the public sphere, warning of the damaging effects of patronage as the dominant form of social relations. Critics argued that rather than maintaining national stability, patronage was exerting a deadening influence on the country's energies, holding back necessary change. In early 1814, the *Monthly Review*, a moderate liberal journal, was rehearsing the evils of government by patronage. Maria Edgeworth

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contributed to this critical discourse in her novel appropriately titled *Patronage* (1814), which contrasts the fortunes of two families, one relying only on their own energetic endeavours and the other resting upon hope of influence. A reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review* explained that the book offered 'a picture

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<sup>1</sup> A caution: Emma's attitude toward class rigidity at the beginning of the novel is not identical to her attitude at the end of the novel.

of miseries resulting from a dependence on Patronage, in every form and degree, and throughout every station in society'. The strongest critics of patronage and privilege were those advocating the ideology of competitive individualism. They were, in effect, the spokespeople for the aspiring middle class. The pernicious effects of influence are also at the centre of *Emma*, and Austen, like Edgewood, sees patronage as damaging those who bestow favour as much as those who are recipients. Nevertheless, Austen's representation is more nuanced in terms of social class. Austen recognises that patronage was a source of influence and power that many of the middle class were willing, even eager, to exploit in their own interests. [...]

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It needs to be stated that while the narrative structure of *Emma* points to the possibility of a new inclusive representative regime of who constitutes the nation, it in no way contemplates a redistribution of wealth or property. Sandie Byrne rightly points out that despite Austen's depiction of a 'mobile and consumerist society [...] Robert Martin is not invited to the Donwell strawberry-picking [...] anymore than he is to the ball or the Box Hill expedition'. Of course, the fact that he is a busy working farmer would deny him the leisure for the first and last of these events. What the novel seems to advocate is a shift of recognition from the rules of vertical exclusion to a more horizontal and egalitarian engagement with the perspectives of a wider social interaction. In advocating this new regime of perceptibility, Austen engages dialogically in the more progressive, inclusive discourse of 'the people' and 'the public' of the post-Revolutionary era. Like them, she welcomes the prospect of the nation as a less hierarchical community, a view of social interaction at odds with an idealist version of 'old England'. The several references in *Emma* to England and Englishness are striking. Yet while Austen joins in the criticism of rank and patronage, as expressed by liberal journals like the *Edinburgh Review*, she saves her harshest satire for the new force of competitive individualism. [a reference to a middle class character, introduced later in the novel, who marries slightly above her station and becomes even more snobby than Emma at the beginning of the novel [...]]<sup>2</sup> As against both exclusivity of birth and the aggressive dominance of self-interest, Austen holds out the possibility or prospect of horizontal social interaction as a basis of self and of England. What is more, the vehicle of this radical transformation is a young woman, Emma.

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<sup>2</sup> I cut out a reference to a middle class character, introduced later in the novel, who marries slightly above her station and becomes even more snobby than Emma at the beginning of the novel. It's not much of a spoiler, but it seemed liable to cause confusion if I left it in.