

## The Clergy in Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain

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The professions that interest Austen most are the clerical, legal, and military but not, and rather surprisingly for modern readers, the medical profession, which is highly respected in the contemporary world. That level of respect was not accorded physicians in nineteenth-century England. While physicians appear in *Sense and Sensibility* and are mentioned in *Emma*, they do not figure in the social worlds of either novel. This disdain for the medical profession was no doubt related to its origins in the chemist shop with its connections to mercantilism, which was not highly regarded in Regency England. Indeed, it would be well into the nineteenth century before physicians began to receive the respect accorded other professionals of the time, one more indication that social changes rarely occur quickly. Change occurs slowly in Austen's works as well. The growing economic and social significance of the professions can be traced over the course of several novels, like steps in a ladder: *Mansfield Park*, with its emphasis on the clergy, the first step; *Emma*, with its magistrates and lawyers, the next step; and neither quite as cognizant of the implications of the professions in a changing social order as *Persuasion*. [...]

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Although Edmund Bertram's [a character in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*] choice of a clerical profession is not unusual for a member of the gentry in the early nineteenth century, his deep commitment to his profession is not the ordinary response of gentlemen of the time. For many in Regency England, a clerical profession was simply one more benefit of an essentially feudal system, a hegemonic order that privileged members of the nobility and landed gentry and provided gentry sons with professions, awarded because of their family connections rather than any particular talent, calling, or commitment. The method of selection of the clergy of the Anglican Church or Church of England for a particular parish was a prime example of this closed system of patronage. The church's benefices were for the most part held by members of the landed gentry and

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awarded to younger sons, who did not have a substantial inheritance and would not in any case inherit land, precisely Edmund Bertram's situation.

Given the laws of primogeniture, which entailed land to the eldest son or eldest male relative, a profession could be an economic necessity for younger sons, and the clergy was considered an acceptable choice among most gentry families. The profession's chief attractions were that it did not involve manual labor and that it allowed the clergyman to live as a country gentleman supported by the Church of England, which was not only the official church of England but also the largest and most prosperous of the nation's religious institutions. For the clergy, then, the ministry was generally a way of life rather than a calling. A case in point is that the major preparation for the Anglican clergy was a university education, whose curriculum for the clergy did not differ markedly from that of other students, most of whom would lead lives of leisure after they left the university. At Oxford, Edmund Bertram would have studied classical literature and mathematics but surprisingly little theology. Whatever the merits or demerits of this preparatory background, it for the most part limited the clerical profession to the gentry, since middle-class families could rarely afford a university education for their offspring. There was still another clerical tie to the gentry: all but the poorest curates, essentially

assistant ministers, held their positions as sinecures, appointments by a large landowner to a church or chapel and a parsonage, generally known as a living. In addition to the living, the vicar also received a portion of the mandatory ten percent tithe of farm income required of residents of the parish, as well as the income from the glebe, the farmlands attached to the rectory, which the vicar could farm or let to others. The clergy, therefore, depended on landed families, not only for their appointment, but also for their livelihood.

This patronage system afforded numerous opportunities for abuse. Both the tithe and the glebe could draw heavily on the clergyman's time-- the tithe because it must be calculated and collected, the glebe because it must be supervised. There were other diversions from purely clerical duties; for example, a clergyman might take in students to add to his income, as Jane Austen's father, George Austen, did or he might take on additional parishes, another common practice. Perhaps the greatest potential for abuses of time and duties involved residency: once appointed, the vicar could choose to live in the parish or he could simply appear there regularly to conduct services, a practice that led to the neglect of all but the essential duties to his parishioners. [...]