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Propriety and Hierarchy in Jane Austen's Novels

Shinobu Minma

‘You are mistaken, Mr Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.’ (*PP*, 192)⁽¹⁾

Thus Elizabeth Bennet expresses her indignation in the memorable scene of her spirited repulse of Darcy's proposal. Astonished as she is at the offer of this 'proud' man, she is more incensed by the insolent manner of his speech, which leads to this pungent reproof. Elizabeth enumerates several reasons for disliking Darcy, but this flat condemnation of his incivility most bitterly pierces his heart. Indeed, in Jane Austen's world the observance of the conventional rules of propriety is a matter of no trivial importance, and deviation from those rules is seldom tolerated, whether it is perpetrated thoughtlessly or deliberately. In Darcy's case, his deviation is quite unwitting one; he has been sometimes even critical of Elizabeth's bold behaviour, and this unexpected attack on his own lack of civility shatters his 'pride'. Marianne Dashwood, on the other hand, disregards the proprieties on her own principles. Her habitual rudeness is the worry of her sister Elinor, but her audacious behaviour sometimes engages our sympathy. In the episode of the dinner party at John Dashwood's house, Mrs Ferrars and Fanny Dashwood attempt to mortify Elinor by malicious

insinuations, and Marianne, unable to bear such an affront on her sister, warmly protests against the insulting ladies. Yet this indecorous manifestation of her sisterly affection is coolly received by Elinor, who 'was much more hurt by Marianne's warmth, than she had been by what produced it' (SS, 236). The importance of conformity to the conventional rules of conduct is perhaps more pointedly stressed in *Sense and Sensibility* than in the other works—indeed, what harm would arise from the disregard of rules is the novel's central theme—but, in any case, certainly nowhere in her novels does Jane Austen encourage anti-social behaviour.

Of course outward conformity to the rules of propriety does not necessarily indicate inward moral integrity, and examples of 'deceitful good manners' abound in Jane Austen's novels. Elizabeth, who is ready to denounce Darcy's haughty manner, is equally ready to be imposed on by Wickham's 'excess of good breeding' (PP, 73), and Emma at first extols Elton's manners as 'a model' (E, 34). But this unreliability of outward manners by no means lessens the importance of rules themselves. Jane Austen was well aware that rules of behaviour were indispensable to maintain social order; in the theatrical episode in *Mansfield Park* we find a vivid representation of anarchy resulting from the disappearance of the proprieties. The observance of rules of behaviour is necessary—this is an implied premise in Jane Austen's world, and from this very premise arises her drama. If the observance of the established rules ensures the preservation of order in society, it does not solve every problem that accompanies the individual's life in society; on the contrary, many complicated problems proceed from the necessity of the existence of rules, and one of them is the problem of deceitful good manners. Not only Elizabeth and Emma but almost all the heroines of Jane Austen's novels have to face the difficulty of

penetrating reality beneath plausible appearance. How to preserve self-respect without infringing laws of society is the problem that confronts Marianne Dashwood. Holding in contempt the mediocre people among whom she is obliged to live, Marianne disdains to comply with the conventional regulations they willingly and perhaps blindly follow ; for her compliance with those regulations means subjection to the foolish neighbours. Yet such vaulting arrogance is to involve her in painful ordeals. Marianne's struggles do illustrate the difficulty intellectuals are liable to experience in reconciling the demands of the individual to those of society.

One essential aspect of 'propriety' in which Jane Austen took a keen interest is its mutability. The significant episode of Fanny's return to Portsmouth in *Mansfield Park* reminds us that the standard of propriety varies from one set of people to another, and Fanny's reaction to its drastic variation is one noteworthy point in the episode. In her father's house Fanny finds enough noise and confusion but no 'manners'—an indication again of the close link between propriety and order—and consequently the value of the tranquility and regularity of Mansfield Park daily increases in her mind. 'After being nursed up at Mansfield, it was too late in the day to be hardened at Portsmouth'—thus the narrator comments about Fanny's inability to adapt herself to the new environment (*MP*, 413). Perhaps Fanny is rather exceptional in her lack of adaptability ; indeed, she is 'the one, over whom habit had most power, and novelty least' (*MP*, 354). Yet it is not Fanny alone who is governed by 'habit' ; even Henry Crawford, who is always in pursuit of novelty, is unable after all to shake off his London habits, and so is his sister Mary—Mansfield fails to 'cure' them. And the relationship between this inflexibility of human nature and the mutability of propriety is one of the author's main concerns in the novel.

The standard of propriety varies, of course, not only from circle to circle but also from age to age; in fact, in Jane Austen's age the standard was fast changing. In England such changes occurred periodically. From Shakespeare's plays we can visualize the 'merry' and lively Elizabethan England; but the cheerful and open atmosphere of this age was succeeded in the seventeenth century by the rigorous and stuffy climate under the influence of Puritanism. Then in the Restoration a free—and not a little dissipated—atmosphere returned to England, which on the whole survived through the eighteenth century. Yet this wild freedom was in turn replaced in the nineteenth century by the stiff solemnity of the Victorian era. The age in which Jane Austen lived was a changeover period from the eighteenth century to the Victorian era; during this period England underwent a radical change in social customs. In 1789 the French Revolution broke out, and amid the growing alarm about the threat of Jacobinism the importance of propriety as an indispensable factor in maintaining order and peace in society was recognized anew. In this reactionary atmosphere a group of ardent reformers—the Evangelicals—carried on energetic campaigns to improve manners and morals, which achieved a notable success by the time the Regency began. In the 'Advertisement' to *Northanger Abbey* written in 1816 Jane Austen begs the reader to remember that 'considerable changes' have taken place since the novel was first begun (in the late 1790s), and one thing amongst others that she mentions as changed is 'manners'. The sober atmosphere that pervades the world of *Mansfield Park* is obviously a reflection of the new serious social climate of the 1810s, and how such rapid transformation in social customs affects the individual—and society as well—is an important theme of the novel. As the scenes of chaotic disturbance which appear more than once in the novel imply, Jane Austen by no means favourably

regarded that situation in her society.

Jane Austen was also well aware that one particular set of rules of propriety was founded on one particular ideology. In *Pride and Prejudice* there is an episode in which Elizabeth walks alone across muddy fields to Netherfield Park to look after her sick sister Jane. This walk exposes her to ridicule and criticism when she arrives there; the most merciless is Miss Bingley, who condemns it as ‘an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum’ (*PP*, 36). Similar censure on woman’s audacity is found in a more serious scene; when Fanny refuses Henry Crawford’s proposal, Sir Thomas accuses her of ‘wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and. . . that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence’ (*MP*, 318). One notices that in either case the reproach itself is a sort of disguise, intentional or unintentional; there is jealousy towards Elizabeth behind Caroline Bingley’s bitterness, and Sir Thomas’s accusation is quite unreasonable, springing solely from the frustrated ambition. Whether just or not, however, their reproaches—the terms they employ—indicate the prevalence of a certain ideological assumption which demands modesty and obedience from women, and on which are built the current rules of propriety; and this assumption is so firmly rooted in people’s mind in Jane Austen’s world—there is actually no one who dares to call it into question—that any transgression of those rules which are based on it is regarded as an ‘offence’. Needless to say, the assumption was generally accepted in the society in which Jane Austen lived. A natural question then arises: were Jane Austen’s views accordant with the dominant ideology of her society?

Women in Jane Austen’s novels are on the whole in a vulnerable

position, economically and socially. They are often obliged to give way to men ; owing to the 'entail' the Bennet girls are deprived of the right to inherit their father's estate, and the Dashwood sisters have to hand over the inheritance of Norland Park to their half brother, to whom 'the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters' (SS, 3), and who, at the instigation of his wife, practically turns them out of Norland. A woman's status in society depends almost entirely on how she marries (hence the pressing importance of marriage to women in the novels) ; an unmarried woman with little money, therefore, 'must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid', as Emma observes (*E*, 85). 'Reputation' of a woman is very fragile; fatal consequences inevitably ensue from women's sexual misconduct, while men's goes with comparative impunity. Thus for the same crime Maria Rushworth suffers severer punishment than Henry Crawford does, and it is also the case with Eliza the daughter and Willoughby—the existence of 'double standards' is palpable there. Although Jane Austen never complains openly of women's vulnerability or articulates a protest against sexual inequality, there seems to be an undercurrent of criticism in their description towards the patriarchal ideology which connives at or even promotes those kinds of injustice. All the same, Jane Austen manifests no wish to deny the efficacy of the conventional rules of propriety, even though they are the offsprings of that unreasonable ideology. Perhaps she was caught in a dilemma, but it seems that her respect for rules was never substantially undermined. There was the problem of 'order', for one thing, and in this respect the French Revolution provided striking object lessons; the bloody disasters which occurred during progress of the revolution warned her, no doubt, of the danger that must necessarily accompany the total abolition of laws of society, however unjust those laws might be. For

another, the welfare of the individual is in fact as much dependent on the existence of rules as that of society—so she considered, and in *Sense and Sensibility* she gives an acute insight into the relationship between rules of behaviour and the individual's emotional welfare. Jane Austen certainly did not regard the rules of propriety current in her society as the best set of rules (at the same time, she probably doubted the existence of such things as the *best* rules) ; but she did not disregard the importance of rules either. Perhaps this is what most distinguishes Jane Austen from radicals of her days—and from radicals of modern days, too, for that matter.

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Elizabeth clothes her reproach in the phraseology: 'had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner'. These words not merely express her objection to his incivility; they carry an obvious implication that Darcy lacks—or has failed to cultivate—qualities requisite to a 'gentleman'. Her words are to all intents and purposes a denial of his gentlemanship, and this is what 'tortures' him (as he later calls it) more than her refusal itself. He is tortured, but not enraged; admitting the justice of her reproof, he repents his conceited arrogance, the result of which appears in his 'civility' which repeatedly surprises Elizabeth in Derbyshire. Yet it is not his altered manner alone that impresses her there. Although Darcy's letter has dispelled her misunderstanding concerning Wickham, doubt has obviously lingered in her mind about his character as a gentleman. At Pemberley, however, she is surprised to hear him described by the housekeeper as 'the best landlord, and the best master. . . that ever lived' (*PP*, 249). 'As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were

in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him!”—thus reflecting, Elizabeth appreciates many heavy responsibilities that appertain to his position (*PP*, 250-251), and Mrs Reynolds’ assurance that he is a faithful discharger of all those responsibilities deeply affects her mind. With her respect for him thus increasing, she feels ‘gratitude’ for ‘his regard’: ‘she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression’ (*PP*, 251). At Pemberley Elizabeth realizes that, important as they certainly are, good manners are by no means all the necessary qualification for a gentleman. And what are the necessary qualifications for a gentleman is indeed a matter of grave importance in Jane Austen’s novels.

A country village is admittedly the stage of Jane Austen’s works, and in England in her days a small community such as a country village was the basic unit of society. At the head of a community stood a local landowner, and within the community ‘a finely graded hierarchy of great subtlety and discrimination’ was formed from the landowner to the labouring poor.⁽²⁾ There were indeed numerous ‘ranks’ or ‘degrees’ which strictly defined people’s positions in the hierarchy, but no ‘classes’ yet ; it was in the years after Waterloo that classes in the sense of mutually hostile layers united by common interests and common source of income came to the surface in English society. In general, there was until then no hostility or antagonism between people in different ranks ; rather, they were closely linked with one another vertically, accepting ‘differential status’ as ‘part of the given, unquestioned environment into which men were born’.⁽³⁾ In such communities the role of landowners was particularly important ; since the power of the government then was confined in such spheres as the maintenance of law and order and the management of foreign affairs,

the landed gentry enjoyed exclusive authority in the countryside. It is not, however, that landowners ruled their communities oppressively; the nature of the gentry's dominion over village life was not so much dictatorship as paternalism. It was commonly held that landowners' privileges—superiority of birth, wealth, leisure and education—were given to them mainly to serve the public, and on the whole the English gentry had a strong sense of responsibility and fulfilled 'their role as keepers of the peace, unpaid civil administrators, promoters of the public good and benefactors of the poor and unfortunate'; indeed, they were 'the major pillar of stability in a world which, bereft of their influence and control, would dissolve into uncertainty, lawlessness, and chaos'.⁽⁴⁾ Jane Austen gives a vivid picture of life in a rural community in *Emma*, and Mr Knightley, an active and benevolent landowner, could be seen as an exemplar of the gentry of this period.

One is inclined to ask whether Jane Austen approved of the hierarchical system of her society unconditionally. But we should be careful in asking this question, as we should be careful in asking whether she approved of the patriarchal system of her society; for, in either case, if we engross ourselves too much in the right or wrong of *the* system or in her attitude towards it, we are likely to miss an essential aspect of her novels. Jane Austen's concern in writing novels lay, above all else, in demonstrating the basic mechanisms of human society, and this is one reason why she so scrupulously avoided references to the contemporary political issues, home or abroad. Incidents and phenomena, such as the French Revolution or the English reaction to it, no doubt attracted her notice; indeed, they were the very things that gave her an insight into the mechanisms; yet she had no wish to participate in the political controversies of the day—no wish to fight for some particular cause or advocate some particular ideology. Her

interest was directed more towards extracting from those incidents and phenomena the general principles that governed man's life in society. As for the hierarchical system of her society, perhaps she felt the injustice of social inequality, just as she felt the injustice of sexual inequality, but denunciation of such injustice was by no means her purpose in writing novels; rather, aware of the inevitability of hierarchy in human society, as she was aware of the indispensability of rules of behaviour, she was more absorbed in the problem of how hierarchy functioned than in the problem of how just its particular instance was. Hence comes the importance of gentlemen's conduct in Jane Austen's novels; she fully realized that the proper operation of hierarchy depended first and foremost on those who stood at the top of it, and that their misconduct would directly affect the welfare of society.

In the hierarchical society persons belonging to privileged classes were expected to give generous help to the underprivileged. In *Emma* there is a scene in which Emma pays a charity visit to a poor sick family with Harriet. Emma is a member—or a 'mistress'—of a family who are 'first in consequence' in Highbury (*E*, 7) ; it is incumbent on her therefore to do this kind of charitable act. Emma believes that she understands her duty well; yet in the course of time her understanding proves to be deficient. 'Equality' or 'inequality' of status matters much in *Emma*, and how those who are in a superior position should behave towards their inferiors is also a recurring topic in the novel. Frank Churchill neglects to make a courtesy visit to his father on his marriage, for which Mr Knightley blames him, putting particular emphasis on his lack of consideration for Mrs Weston: 'It is on her account that attention to Randalls is doubly due, and she must doubly feel the omission. Had she been a person of consequence herself, he

would have come I dare say ; and it would not have signified whether he did or no' (*E*, 149). A similar view is expressed when Mr Weston advises Frank not to defer his visit to Jane Fairfax : 'any want of attention to her *here* should be carefully avoided. You saw her with the Campbells when she was the equal of every body she mixed with, but here she is with a poor old grandmother, who has barely enough to live on. If you do not call early it will be a slight' (*E*, 194). The lower a person's position is or the more adverse his circumstances are, the more attention is due to him—this is the principle the two gentlemen formulate, and which is indeed a key principle in the hierarchical society ; consequently, as Mr Weston observes, 'any want of attention' to such persons 'should be carefully avoided' on the part of their superiors. That is why Emma's thoughtless behaviour towards Miss Bates at Box Hill carries so serious a meaning ; she derides a person whom she must not deride. Hers is an act, that is, which undermines the very mechanism of hierarchy.

But Emma's defective sense of duty is perhaps less culpable than a certain tendency she exhibits—a tendency to dissimulate her motives. In her officious efforts to make a match between Harriet and Elton, she persuades herself into believing that she is acting for Harriet's sake. She defines it to herself as 'a very kind undertaking' when the idea first occurs to her (*E*, 24), and her belief in her own 'kindness' does not falter in the slightest degree throughout the whole affair, even when she tears Harriet away from Robert Martin. In fact, however, Emma's match-making project is motivated by circumstances and inclinations that have nothing to do with Harriet, such as the absence of intellectual stimulus after Miss Taylor's marriage, a desire to display her own cleverness, a love of managing and arranging, etc, etc ; but she would not admit those motivations to herself and, instead, always pleads

Harriet's advantage. The scheme itself ends comically with the unexpected offer of marriage to herself by Elton ; yet, considering her position in society, this tendency to self-delusion is by no means comical.

Besides Emma, Jane Austen delineates several characters who have the same habit of dissembling their real motives. General Tilney is an absolute despot, but he usually exercises control over others covertly. In the scene of the conducted tour he first takes Catherine outdoors, saying he 'yields' to her wishes as if it were 'against his own inclination' (*NA*, 177) ; in fact, it is the General himself who wishes to go out, for it is his usual hour for walking. It is indeed customary for the General to impose his will upon others under the cover of some specious pretexts. This sort of dissimulation is also discernible in Darcy in his act of separating Bingley from Jane. In his letter to Elizabeth he asserts that he did it solely for Bingley's sake. The reasons he adduces for disapproving of the union are convincing ; yet it is certainly not Bingley's advantage alone that actuates Darcy to force him to give up Jane. Priding himself on his abilities, he, like Emma, loves to dictate to others ; this motivation is hidden, however, from himself as well as from others under the plausible pretext of saving Bingley. But among these self-deceiving characters the most impressive one is Sir Thomas Bertram. Sir Thomas is a man within whom a strong moral sense and worldly ambition coexist, and on occasions—especially on occasions of importance—his moral sense is temporarily suspended. After the departure of Maria and Julia, Henry Crawford's courtship of Fanny becomes the main focus of the story, and the part Sir Thomas plays in this episode is very important, though by no means conspicuous. After noticing Crawford's particular attentions to his niece, Sir Thomas, 'though infinitely above scheming or contriving' (*MP*, 238), encourages

the intercourse with the Parsonage, holds the ball at his house, and thus, providing favourable opportunities to the young man, paves the way for his proposal. His object of these exercises is of course to realize the 'advantageous' union ; Fanny is an instrument for extending his family's 'respectable alliances' (*MP*, 20). But all the while he continues to disguise this motivation from himself. At first he would not even admit to himself that he is 'contriving' and 'scheming' ; the ball is held, he persuades himself, to gratify 'William's desire of seeing Fanny dance' (*MP*, 252). Then, obliged to own his purpose, he deludes himself into believing that it is for Fanny's sake. When he communicates Henry's proposal to Fanny, he imagines that 'he must be gratifying her far more than himself' (*MP*, 314) ; and when confronted with her refusal, he flings at her quite unreasonable accusations. His moral judgement is totally suspended there.

General Tilney, Darcy, Sir Thomas, and Emma—they are all persons who hold a responsible position in society ; all of them stand at the top of hierarchy. And for this very reason their dishonesty about motivation and intention poses a serious problem. In many cases their dishonesty is unconscious one ; unconsciously they replace unpalatable motivations with palatable ones, and thus justify to themselves their own unpalatable actions. This subtle operation paralyses conscience, as it were ; it enables one to commit an act which one could hardly commit with an easy conscience in their normal state, or if one is fully aware of one's true motivation—the substitute specious pretext gives sanction to any cruelty or injustice. Jane Austen well knew the danger involved in this kind of self-justification ; in France in the 1790s savage slaughter was perpetrated in the name of Revolution. Of course in her novels she does not depict such atrocities ; with a penetrating insight into the workings of the human mind, however, she seems to warn us that grim

consequences might arise when it works wrong. Significantly, those who show the tendency to the unconscious self-justification are all persons in an influential position. As Elizabeth realizes at Pemberley, 'many people's happiness' rests on these persons' 'guardianship'; it is in their power to bestow 'much pain' as well as 'much pleasure'; indeed, whether 'much good' or 'much evil' is done depends on their conduct. Jane Austen draws a number of 'irresponsible' gentlemen; Henry Crawford spends so little time at his own estate that he little knows what is going on there, and Sir Walter Elliot, owing to his snobbish extravagance, is obliged to let his seat, Kellynch Hall. But in a sense irresponsibility is less harmful than responsibility misdirected; negligence is less pernicious than misplaced enthusiasm. In the name of 'kindness' Emma severs Harriet from a suitable man, and the other gentlemen also betray a similar propensity to unjust or cruel control of others (Emma's 'kindness' is unwelcome to the community as well – her arbitrary raising of Harriet's status is an act which disturbs order in hierarchy). Thus the self-absorption in a person in authority is apt to affect the welfare of many; indeed, the 'guardianship' is transformed unwittingly into a 'menace' to society. That Jane Austen repeatedly portrayed self-deceiving persons of consequence points, it seems, to her deep anxiety about this sinister tendency, and that her anxiety was not exaggerated has been amply proved by history.

NOTES

- (1) References to Jane Austen's works are to: *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-4); the page numbers with the abbreviated titles of the novels are included in the text.
- (2) Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p.24.

- (3) Perkin, p.24.
- (4) G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry : the Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class*
(London : Longman, 1976), pp.163-4.