

The Manners and Customs of life in Jane Austen's time

– OR how to win the mating game!

1. THE POWER TO CHOOSE

When the nineteen year old Jane Austen was first trying her hand at novel writing, she could be sure that there were many readers of her own age who would identify with the world she presented. She began serious writing in the 1790s at a time where at least half the nation of Great Britain was under twenty one years of age. Life expectancy back then was about thirty seven years. Although Jane Austen's one sister and six brothers all lived surprisingly long lives, into their fifties and well beyond, she herself lived only four years longer than the life expectancy for the period, reaching just forty one years of age at the time of her death.

Jane Austen's writing focused on the rituals of youthful courtship which she observed within her own family and among the English professional and landed classes in general. She was particularly interested in the changing attitudes towards marriage among these young people and their parents. There had been a slight shift from parent-power to arrange marriages of social and financial convenience to "daughter-power" by which a young lady might have some say in the matter of choosing a mate she fancied. There were now wider opportunities to explore romantic feelings (but not sex!) before marriage, and daughters might be able to select a partner from a

limited number of eligible suitors during the annual season of balls, family parties and visits.

However, girls were not gaining any noticeably easier access to legal rights or professional opportunities at this time. There was an over-riding assumption that men and women were different in natural capabilities. Consequently, both men and women ought to accept distinct social roles, marked out along gender lines, where women were denied equality of opportunity in areas such as education, business and action. Girls were praised for being submissive, modest, pure and domesticated. The qualities of being independently-minded, studious or talented were seldom regarded as feminine attractions.

Another example of unequal opportunity between the sexes concerned physical relationships before marriage. A girl's chastity was absolutely vital for her good name, while a man's was not. The reasoning behind this was no man could pretend a baby of his belonged to his wife when this was not true, since his wife would certainly know she had not given birth to the baby! However, a wife could deceive her husband by saying that the baby she had given birth to was his when in fact the baby's father was a different man. Thus, if a young lady had slept with a man other than her husband, there was a risk that any baby boy born in the subsequent marriage might inherit property which did not rightfully belong to him, as the baby had been secretly conceived out of the marriage.

A baby girl posed less of a risk since she was very unlikely ever to inherit property while there was any male heir available somewhere in the family. This inheritance arrangement was called "male primogeniture", and it was the established legal system at that time. (Jane Austen presents the five Bennet girls as victims of this procedure in *Pride and Prejudice*.) The system ensured that women rarely became heirs to property. Instead, eldest sons or, if no sons were available, closest male relatives inherited the family estates to prevent the splitting up of properties and land. It is easy to see why a girl's reputation for sexual virtue was so vital; her future husband's family continuity in terms of bloodline and property depended on it!

Courtship, then, was a complicated business for the more privileged members of society in England during Jane Austen's time. A son of a noble family – even one with a "womanizer" name for himself- might successfully court a merchant's daughter, if her fortune was great enough, and her reputation beyond question. He might indeed, be put under pressure by his parents to do so, in order to bring in a huge boost to the family's wealth. However, a nobleman's daughter must remember that she would not be allowed to marry a merchant, because the family's great estates might then fall under the control of a dealer in trade, and the family name and continuity might be lost. In those days, people who were born into the higher classes regarded themselves as more established and important than people who had only recently become wealthy. Running a business and being "in trade" was thought of as earning "new money" in contrast to being rich with "old money" from property which had been held within the family for a long time.

Jane Austen herself, as a clergyman's daughter, did not hold sufficient promise of land or dowry to attract a noble suitor. However, it would have been important for her to make a match worthy of her mother's distinguished relations and her father's scholarly and religious status in their community. Her attractive vitality did win her the interest of more than one suitable young man during her courtship days, but despite the temptation of a proposal from a well-born, if awkward, young man of property, she was not prepared to endure "the misery of being bound without love," and therefore chose to reject the offer.

It is not surprising that Jane Austen presents us with young heroines who are negotiating the business of courtship with varying levels of confidence and skill. She knew from first-hand experience how carefully a girl's behaviour would be observed by sharp-eyed relations and other assessors, old and young, at social occasions. All these watchers would be keen to detect any sign of "loose morals" or vulgarity of style. She also knew that even exemplary manners, outstanding charm and dazzling beauty might not be enough to entice a suitor if the young lady's family background was not regarded as suitably wealthy or distinguished for his family. It all seems a daunting prospect compared with the apparent freedom young people enjoy today in their interactions with the opposite sex.

One reason that well-born young people then might have felt much more restricted by the manners and customs of their day than today's well-off youth is that back in those days, England's total population was small, only

about six million in all, and interconnections among local gossipers were thus rapidly made. The English lived mostly in close-knit countryside areas; only about half a million lived in small towns. Most better-off houses contained more than one servant, and the larger estates would often have more than thirty resident members of staff who might glimpse the activities of young masters and mistresses. There was little opportunity to break the codes of conduct without being reported for it.

Over a million people lived in England's great city— the capital of London - at that time, so perhaps there was a hope of mingling in with the crowd anonymously there. But if young ladies and gentlemen from rural areas hoped for more freedom of movement in the streets of the capital, they must often have been disappointed. The city was a constant centre of attraction for well-off people from the provinces. They would arrive in the city for visits and extended stays, where socializing might be arranged in the more fashionable and exclusive areas of London. Thus, there would be a "higher society zone" even among temporary residents visiting from the country. This exclusive system ensured a tight control on any newcomers within the city-based circles of the great, the rich and the well-connected.

In England, there were only about three hundred families within the bracket of the titled nobility and non-titled owners of huge estates. Thus, it was easy to keep track of what was going on in the higher levels of the social scene, either in the city or in the country. A girl's reputation was easily lost by one careless mistake in manners. (For the four million people who worked in towns or on the land, to scratch out a living, matters of manners

in courtship were hardly an issue – it was more a question of survival, since the gap between rich and poor was huge, and life at the poorest end was blighted by undernourishment and disease.)

2. STREET WISDOM OF THE PRESENT AND THE PAST.

London's population today stands at over seven million, and England's population is nearing sixty million. Great Britain's total population has reached about sixty two million in 2005, with twenty four million in the bracket of young people between 15 and 34 years of age. These figures tell us that young people nowadays can easily be lost in a crowd, with no servants to observe them, in areas where even close neighbours may be total strangers.

So we can see that young people who read Jane Austen's novels today might at first feel that social customs and manners of two hundred years ago were very restrictive compared with today's apparently casual lifestyles. Yet whether today's young people are socially intermingling by clubbing, dating, partying or ten pin bowling, there are always conventions attached to each particular activity. For example, it can be regarded as "bad form" for a man to send intense, complex text messages to his girlfriend if he knows she is out celebrating with her mates that night and not likely to want to divert attention to him on her mobile simultaneously. Similarly, even in alternative activities for young people – e.g. participating in a circle of Glastonbury fire walkers - all the participants await the facilitator's instructions before walking barefoot across red-hot coals. Fire walking

might be regarded as a very unusual recreational activity among young people, a free space where any conventional expectations of behaviour might be put aside. Yet even here, there is a definite code of etiquette about stepping out onto the embers; one does not launch oneself into the arena unless all other members of the circle are at that moment still poised on the edge.

One common concern in most social activities, past or present, is avoiding the embarrassment of social stigma. We may think we have been released from such worries in the 21st century, but obsessions about our looks, weight, clothing and means of transport might suggest otherwise. TV programmes which place people under severe stress within very confined social situations are avidly followed, and behaviour which breaks that “Big Brother” code of etiquette becomes an instant source of national gossip.

In the early 1800s, there were certain manners and customs in courtship which it was vital for young ladies and gentlemen to obey if they were to be accepted as potential participants within high society’s marriage market. The underlying principle which informed these codes was that you displayed your availability and attractions to appropriate members of the opposite sex effectively, yet without deception, vulgarity or exploitation. (Actually, a gentleman could exploit a young woman shamelessly if she was obviously totally inappropriate as a potential partner – i.e. a maid servant - but any lady would be utterly condemned for similar inappropriate conduct with a footman.)

It is important to note, however, that among the young people themselves, the interpretation of what was undesirable might vary according to one's feelings about the person concerned. A rosy cheeked complexion in an outdoor girl might be regarded as "common" by some, but others might see the same feature as a welcome sign of naturalness and spontaneity of character. Jane Austen was particularly interested in this complication in the courtship game because it intrigued her that a young lady might fail to attract a suitable match simply by succeeding too well at playing by the rules. In characters from her novels, there is a definite air of attraction about those who know exactly how to dance with grace and speak with courtesy and yet who take the risk at times of breaking these rules to reveal a genuine intensity of response in a social interaction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's criticism of the sweet-smiling Jane Bennet is that she plays the courtship game too perfectly. Consequently, he supposes (wrongly) that she must be cynically exploiting his gullible friend Bingley. However, Elizabeth's sparkling opposition to Darcy wins his grudging admiration because she breaks the rules yet commands his respect in the process.

3. CODES OF CONDUCT

We now turn to look at actual rules of etiquette between young ladies and gentlemen in the 1800s. The protocol of what was "done" and "not done" must have seemed extremely complicated to any young person with the intention to socialize faultlessly. Here, we consider just three of countless

general points about gentlemen's good conduct. In terms of day-to-day socializing, a gentleman needed to establish that he was paying attention to the appropriate daughter of a family, since it was bad form to take an interest in a younger sister "still in the school room" and not yet started on the seasonal rounds of balls and dances. This was particularly frowned upon if the young girl had an older sister who was "out", available for courtship and not yet spoken for

A second rule was that a lady must not be kept standing and talking in the street; a gentleman must turn and walk with the young lady if she indicated that she was willing to converse. This escorting might be necessary for her safety if her well-born status was apparent to any criminal member of the lower classes who might be tempted to rob or "dishonour" her in some way. Harriet Smith is subjected to just such an attack in *Emma*.

A third example of gentlemanly behaviour was that a gentleman must always be introduced to a lady, since it was presumed to be an honour to meet her – never the other way round. These three rules –among many more – serve to indicate the importance of protecting a virtuous young lady's reputation by avoiding inappropriate interactions.

There were an even larger number of prohibitive rules which governed the behaviour of young ladies. It is evident that these too were focused on the preservation of the girl's good name. A young lady was initially expected to leave a calling card, rather than to make an actual visit, when paying a visit to a higher-born acquaintance; she was never to wear pearls or diamonds

in the morning and she was never to call on a gentleman unless it was on a business matter. Breaking these three rules would run the risk of her seeming to be either a brash social climber (in the first case) or a lady of loose reputation (in the second and third examples).

For young ladies, as for young gentlemen, there was the additional problem of working out who was the appropriate family member to target in the courtship game. Doubtless, daughters who were being primed by parents for a very suitable marriage would be discouraged from smiling enticingly at the younger son of a family if the elder son was available and first in line for a generous inheritance. One wonders how on earth a young girl starting on her first round of balls could hope to work out who was eligible and who was not, especially since it would be very bad form to enquire about a young gentleman's fortune to his face!

Rules of appropriate dress were also very important to observe, since they provided coded information which could be very useful. In the early 1800s, the fashionable courtship dress for young ladies was a pale, high-waisted frock which fastened down the back, and was made of thin muslin. Ladies might wear a thinly boned corset and a long slip underneath the low-cut frock. A young lady might wear a sleeveless top or a waist-length jacket (spencer) as well, and would inevitably wear a bonnet if walking outside.

A young gentleman's clothing was based on his riding costume. He would wear a linen shirt and either a neckband (a stock) or a cravat. Tall boots were worn over his hip-hugging breeches, and his "dress" riding coat had

long tails and was high-cut and double-breasted. In this fashion for both sexes, the natural lines of the body were emphasized, in contrast to the elaborately formal style of a royal court. A look either too ornate or too casual would indicate some social awkwardness in the young person concerned, and could thus serve as a warning to potential partners that any betrothal plans might best be reviewed.

The sequences of movements which young ladies and gentlemen performed to music, positioned in lines facing one another, allowed the figures of the young people to be exposed to public gaze at parties, dances and balls. There were also opportunities for partners to converse across the lines while awaiting their turn to step into motion. The fashion of the time meant that grace of movement and trimness of build among the dancers could be instantly assessed. (Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* is found embarrassingly wanting in dancing skills!) Courtship was a very serious business and those involved in the ritual needed every opportunity to weigh up the assets of a possible partner in marriage. After all, a young man's correct choice of young lady to court could be a vital career move and financial investment, as well as the selection of a life partner. For a young lady, too, the choice of a suitor meant taking a huge step of trust. She would be relinquishing all that she owned to her future husband, becoming entirely dependent on the settlement negotiated between her suitor and the parents or guardians concerned.

4. PRESERVING ONE'S REPUTATION

There was much to gain and even more to lose when choosing a marriage partner. The stakes were very high, since any scandal attached to the business of courtship and marriage affected the good name of the innocent as well as those who broke the rules; the Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice* are all tarnished by their sister Lydia's reckless actions. The seriousness of the whole process is put forward by Catherine Morland to Mr Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* when she disagrees with him that a country-dance is like a marriage. "To be sure not. People that dance only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour," she comments. "People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together." Mr Tilney later reinforces his point about the similarities between dancing and marriage by pointing out that in each, "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal."

Catherine's remark indicates that she does not regard dancing as a prime opportunity for enjoyable flirtation. In this conversation with Mr Tilney, she seems to suggest that marriage is a dull prospect, involving little more than house-keeping and unquestioned loyalty. This somewhat pessimistic view of the courtship process seems to contrast with a naïve romantic excitement which she frequently displays in mixed company. Indeed, later in this same conversation she laments the isolation of country life and exclaims fervently of her dancing and socializing experiences in the city, "Oh who could ever be tired of Bath!"

The inconsistency of Catherine's responses is hardly surprising, given that any unmarried young lady of that time would have very limited knowledge of relaxed familiarity between the sexes, either in words or gestures.

English sexual behaviour in the 1800s was very constrained; a well-born young lady was certainly not supposed to have any sort of flirtatious contact before marriage, and even gestures such as a passionate pressing of the hand, a waist-clasp or a kiss could be the subject of critical gossip.

However, rules were surprisingly different once not "under someone's roof". Perhaps this was because some responsibility for the protection of a young lady's virtue lay with the owner of the property while she was housed within its walls. In the great outdoors, such indirect responsibility of protection was often lifted. Unmarried young ladies and gentlemen could walk outside or go for carriage rides together, particularly in neutral territory, without the inhibiting supervision of a chaperone. Taking the air together, positioned alongside one another and conversing in private, was not regarded as damaging to their reputation, provided their behaviour was not openly "vulgar". Similarly, public balls and assemblies meant that there was no host in charge who felt personally responsible for the welfare of his younger guests. The public right of entry into these entertainments might even provide opportunities for an unknown gentleman to ask a young lady to dance, supposing the master of ceremonies had made the required introductions. At private balls, however, the "under someone's roof" rules came back into operation, and an appointed chaperone would see to

introductions, often supervising her young lady's list of requests for particular dances on her dance card, using a pencil attached to the card by a ribbon.

One could socialise with members of the opposite sex at house parties where card games such as *Casino* (*Sense and Sensibility*) *Quadrille* (*Emma*) and *Speculation* (*Mansfield Park*) were among those which were popular in the 1800s. Other amusements included charades, musical performances and guided tours of the host's public rooms and gardens. Nervous newcomers to this sort of party could look to an increasing number of books being published at that time about Conduct and Morality which offered all sorts of advice as to appropriate behaviour in social interaction. Not all young ladies appreciated such guidance. Dr Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, first published in 1766, are received with little enthusiasm by the Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice*; nor do they appreciate Mr. Collins' reading from the text or developing his own rules of conduct on their behalf!

A visit to a country house might last considerably longer than a weekend, due to travel difficulties which made it impractical to turn round and start travelling home within two days of arrival. One can imagine that perfect social behaviour for days on end must have placed huge demands on young people in an unfamiliar domestic setting. However, if the country house was nearer home and you were paying a briefer visit, there was still tension enough. One such worry among many might be the matter of needing different appropriate outfits to wear for morning, tea time and dinner; the

wrong outfit at the wrong time of day might indicate a lack of well-tuned social sense or sufficient clothes-budget, or both. An illustrated handbook such as *The Mirror of Graces* (1811) could provide useful guidance about taste and propriety, but it also served to make matters of costume sound very complicated, adapting its advice according to “the Seasons of the Year, Rank and Situation in Life.”

5. THE ETIQUETTE OF TRAVEL

Even if one rose to the challenges of appropriate dress, there were further potential sources of social embarrassment in the matter of transport. To be seen in a gig (a basic two-wheel horse-drawn vehicle) was not a mark of particular distinction, whereas a curicle, drawn by two horses, was considerably more impressive, being very much a rich man’s toy. The chaise and four, a carriage drawn by four horses, was of the highest possible status if closed in and protected from all weathers, and decorated with a coat of arms. The less cosy barouches, landaus and phaetons were slightly inferior to these noble carriages but in their turn, they were superior in status to the functional gig. At the end of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot’s senior status as the wife of Captain Wentworth is established by her being “the mistress of a very pretty landaulette” – a feminine version of a desirable vehicle in which to be seen. Even an unmarried young lady might be seen driving a phaeton (as Miss De Bourgh does in *Pride and Prejudice*) but this would be a mark of that lady’s financial independence and probably indicated her privileged status as an heiress, there being no brother or close

male relation to inherit in her stead. She might thus appear to be an independent young woman but she would then have the difficulty of being assiduously courted for her wealth and property. This might make it hard for her to assess whether she would be valued for her personal qualities as well.

6. A VOICE FOR ALL TIME

All in all, the mating game in the 1800s was not one to be entered lightly, either by young gentlemen or by young ladies. It is fortunate indeed that we have Jane Austen's six novels which demonstrate so powerfully the vulnerability of young girls who were expected to play by the rules and to live up to the huge responsibilities placed upon them for the family's good name and prosperity. It is also clear that there were regrettable pressures on young men which precluded their marrying for love – let us remember Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* who apparently thought of Marianne, the love he gave up for a more profitable marriage, with lasting regret. However, Jane Austen's focus is principally on the pressures which a young woman was under to find future happiness while negotiating the manners and customs of the time. Given that all of her five eligible brothers married well, while she and Cassandra remained spinsters, it is understandable that Jane Austen must have felt that unmarried young women needed a voice through literature which they were not generously given in society at that time.

It is hard to imagine how unmarried girls of the 1800s could have had a more impressive spokeswoman than the writer of these six novels. Indeed, Jane Austen has come to speak for all readers who are interested in how the individual can survive with integrity within a restricted society, whether past, present or future. The voice she uses is often subtle in its delicious irony, either when she speaks as narrator or through one of her characters. In *Pride and Prejudice* we hear authorial irony in the description of Lydia and Kitty who are usually tempted to visit Meryton "three or four times a week, to pay their duty to their aunt, and to a milliner's shop just over the way." Clearly, the girls have no "duty" to go shopping for hats, and so the suggestion that they are acting out of a sense of genuine family obligation here is an observation designed to amuse the observant reader by being the opposite of the truth. It is a feature of such irony that the author is placing her faith in the reader's shared sense of humour and depth of character observation, almost as if we were members of her own family. Jane Austen's much beloved character, the sparkling Elizabeth, shows the same sort of witty humour when she remarks to her newly engaged sister Jane, "Perhaps, if I have very good luck, I may meet with another Mr Collins in time!"

Whatever tone she chooses to adopt, it is a mark of Jane Austen's genius that the consistent struggle for individual integrity within society is as relevant to her readers today as it was at the time she was writing, two hundred years ago. She presents situations which may be ridiculous, amusing, engaging, challenging or pitiful, and her heroines cope with these

experiences from a number of psychological standpoints which include Marianne's emotional vulnerability, Emma's controlling arrogance and Anne's self-contained humility, to name but a few. Whatever the inner or outer circumstances which are brought to bear on her heroine, Jane Austen always examines the struggle for individual integrity in terms of body and soul, mind and heart, and moves beyond exploring the manners and customs of the day to illuminating the universality of human experience.

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