

Restoring the Balance of Reason and Feeling

The enduring popularity of Jane Austen's novels and, indeed, of the writer herself, appears to be more assured than ever these days, as shown by the worldwide attention given to the occasion of the 250th anniversary last year of her birth on December 16, 1775. It amounted to a phenomenon that could without exaggeration be called Austenmania. (Indeed, *Austenmania!* was the title of a year-long exhibition at Jane Austen's home in Chawton, Hampshire, organised to commemorate the anniversary.)

The tributes were not confined to the Anglosphere, but came from across the world, for instance, from India, in the form of articles with such titles as "Why Jane Austen Matters at 250 Even in Modern India" and "From Delhi to Dorset: Reading Jane Austen across Continents". Dubai celebrated Austen's anniversary with a "Journey with Jane" talk at the 2025 Emirates Airline Festival of Literature. Incidentally, the Jane Austen Society MENAP (Middle East, North Africa and Pakistan) is based in Dubai. Austen's works have been translated into well over forty languages, including Chinese, Arabic and Turkish. Even Japanese manga versions of her novels are available.

There have been numerous stage adaptations of Austen's work, the earliest dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, while the first significant film version of an Austen novel was MGM's 1940 *Pride and Prejudice*, with Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier as Elizabeth and Darcy. Later this year Netflix will be releasing a new version of *Pride and Prejudice* in six parts, with Rufus Sewell and Olivia Colman as Mr and Mrs Bennet. London's West End production of Isobel McArthur's comedy, *Pride & Prejudice** (sort of*), with an all-female cast, will be touring Australia from June to October this

year. So Jane Austen is definitely trending.

But quite apart from anniversary celebrations, adaptations of her work for popular entertainment and, of course, those widespread social activities involving fun Regency cosplay, Austen's work continues to attract the attention and efforts of literary critics worldwide, who focus on a range of aspects, approaches, and points of view. Michael Giffin's study, *Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation* (a revised edition of his 2002 work, *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England*) seeks to provide an intellectual, theological and social perspective on Austen's novels.

Giffin is a retired Anglican priest with a strong interest in literary criticism, who has written extensively on religious aspects in literature of the Anglosphere. Previous publications include a chapter on Jane Austen in the 2009 *Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, *Arthur's Dream: The Religious Imagination in the Fiction of Patrick White* (1996) and *Religion in the English Novel: From Jane Austen to Margaret Atwood* (2020).

In *Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation*, Giffin contends that literary critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have generally subjected Austen's work to secular interpretations, thereby failing to take account of what he has identified as the significant theological element present in all of her novels. (However, it should be noted that over the last century, there have certainly been critics who have written about Jane Austen's Christianity in relation to her work, for example, Peter J. Leithart.) In his study, Giffin is concerned to redress the literary-critical balance, by exploring Austen's cultural milieu through an examination of her work in the light of the eighteenth-century intellectual climate of British Empiricism (exemplified by the work of the philosopher John Locke, amongst others), in conjunction with the prevailing Georgian Anglicanism of her time. Although she received limited formal education, Austen grew up in a bookish household as the daughter of an

Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation

by Michael Giffin

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Anglican clergyman; and two of her brothers also joined the Anglican clergy. Indeed, Giffin declares:

Her social commentaries are religious commentaries. Her novels critique the faults of human beings and the flaws of human institutions including marriage, society, and the church. Austen conducts her critique as a child of the rectory, a practising Anglican, a Georgian believer in the metaphysics intuited from the Hebrew and Christian worldviews.

Furthermore, Giffin argues that Jane Austen was an adherent of

a form of naturalism closely identified with British Empiricism. These theological/philosophical senses of naturalism pervade Austen's novels and make them commentaries about naturalism rather than artefacts of literary naturalism.

Incidentally, this view makes sense of Charles Darwin's love of Austen's work. He was a dedicated Janeite and her books travelled with him on HMS *Beagle*. Peter W. Graham explains in *Jane Austen and Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* (2008) that both Austen and Darwin "were keen observers of the world before them, observers who excelled both in noticing microscopic particulars and ... in discerning the cosmic significance of those small details".

Giffin sees the typical pattern of each of Jane Austen's novels as a process of the restoration of "the ideal balance of reason and feeling", where "the function of reason was to inform the morals and manners of the individual and the community". More controversially, he argues that other critics have mistakenly invested her characters with

a psychological probability they are not meant to have in the Georgian novel. That the protagonists are tropes in a discourse, not literary approximations of "real" people, helps the reader understand why most of her heroines have a preternatural (or unnatural) imbalance of reason or feeling. Catherine Morland is the only heroine who strikes me as representative of a typical young woman of her age and milieu; the rest of Austen's heroines appear to function primarily as vehicles for discursive rhetoric.

This view of the characters of Jane Austen's novels as "tropes in a discourse" would seem to be limited and reductive, and unlikely to correspond with the experience of most of her readers, past or

present. After all, Austen is frequently mentioned together with Shakespeare and Dickens, surely a tribute, amongst her other qualities, to her genius for characterisation. Indeed, it is always aesthetically satisfying to turn, at random, to a page in an Austen novel and immediately recognise which character it is who is talking or reflecting, so perfectly idiosyncratic are the features of speech of her characters.

Nonetheless, Giffin's book has much to offer the reader of Jane Austen who is prepared to take an interest in her intellectual, theological and social context, a context which can undoubtedly be seen to influence her interpretation of the world around her, and especially to affect her underlying preoccupations in the novels.

Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation opens with a lengthy chapter divided into eight parts, outlining the theoretical basis of Giffin's approach to Austen's work: Dramatic Form, Hypergamous Imperatives, Literary Criticism, Classical Metaphysics, British Empiricism, Unregulated Capitalism, Georgian Anglicanism, and The Economy of Salvation. This introduction is followed by six chapters in which he explores her novels in the light of these ideas. In the final chapter of the book, "Reading Austen Today", Giffin deals, sometimes scathingly, with recent trends in literary criticism, including metapsychology, postcolonialism and poststructuralism, and with the frequently laughable and even appalling results of their indiscriminate application to Austen's novels.

In Giffin's opening chapter, the central New Testament concept of the economy (*oikonomia*) of salvation (*soteria*) is explained, as God's plan for the husbandry or management of human salvation through Jesus Christ. Giffin argues that in her work, Austen shows a strong awareness of this concept, especially in its application to human society and to man's fallen condition:

For Austen, the *oikonomia* of the secular household (that is, the lay household) of the estate is a microcosm of the *oikonomia* of the state, while the *oikonomia* of the clerical household of the parish is a microcosm of the church. This domestic *oikonomia* and the *soteria* it effects, revolves around men and women as complementary partners in the sense of "evenly balanced or proportioned", one definition of "equal" that suggests complementarity between the sexes.

No wonder, then, that the focus of Jane Austen's novels is always on marriage, whether she is depicting the development of a relationship between a

hero and heroine, or whether she is examining the varied effects of a bad marriage on a family. Giffin makes the point convincingly:

The dominating theme in Austen's novels is mitigating the social, economic, and moral effects of bad *oikonomia* in families that do not have the benefit of the complementary partnership of a mature husband and a mature wife, or of a mature father and a mature mother. Austen subscribes to the scriptural model of effective headship, refracted through the prisms of British Empiricism and Georgian Anglicanism ... Austen's idea of sexual maturity has nothing to do with patriarchal coercion and everything to do with complementary exchanges of power between men and women.

To support Giffin's view, we need only to think, for instance, of that obvious example of a bad marriage and consequent bad *oikonomia* offered by Mr and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Their Longbourn estate is poorly managed and, thanks to Mr Bennet's self-protective detachment from his wife, and to her own foolishness and wilfulness, their daughters are exposed not only to economic disadvantage, but also to moral danger. The daughters' only way out of this situation is to make prudent marriages. And in *Emma*, the solipsistic behaviour of Mr Woodhouse, Emma's widowed father, means that he is a very ineffective, albeit loving, parent. For instance, he fails to caution her against her arrogant interference in the life of Harriet Smith, and in Emma's relationship with him, the roles of parent and child appear often to be reversed. Perhaps this is a central reason why, at the close of the novel, Emma marries Mr Knightley, seventeen years her senior, who has long since been her friend, but who, more importantly, has stood *in loco parentis*, respectfully listening to her, observing her, advising her, and sometimes admonishing her.

Giffin shows that instances of bad *oikonomia* in the context of the family occur in every Austen novel, while the restoration of good *oikonomia* is achieved at the close of each novel, via appropriate and loving marriages where the men and women concerned are indeed "complementary partners". The marital partnership of Elizabeth and Darcy, achieved at the close of *Pride and Prejudice*, is an obvious example. Certainly, Giffin makes a substantial case for this aspect of his view of the theological basis of Austen's work.

Another part of Giffin's introduction, "Unregulated Capitalism", provides a social and economic context for the turbulent times in which Jane Austen lived and wrote, which makes sense of

her preoccupation with money, as shown so often by the precise details she provides of the economic circumstances of her characters: "She lived in a capitalist society undergoing massive flux and change." What appears to have been especially interesting to her, as Giffin points out, is the social mobility enabled by such a situation, while she was equally concerned with the economic deprivations suffered by so many:

It was her gift to describe the essential vulnerability and insecurity of a representative range of classes in the Georgian period, including her own, to notice the high degree of social mobility that capital conveyed on those who had the means to produce wealth in a market economy, and notice also the disadvantage created by insufficient capital.

Much has been written about Jane Austen and her preoccupation with economics and her unabashed appreciation of the importance of money. Auden was moved to poetry by her downright attitude:

You could not shock her more than she shocks me,
Beside her, Joyce seems innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of "brass",
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.

In his discussion, Giffin makes the very worthwhile point that men as well as women were economically vulnerable in Georgian society, and that Jane Austen demonstrates an awareness of this issue in her work:

Primogeniture can be easily subverted by the whim of a patriarch or a matriarch, and many sons are not first sons and can suffer from the exigencies of primogeniture just as much as their sisters can. In Austen's novels, young men can be as socially, economically, and morally vulnerable as young women.

Giffin shows Austen to be strongly aware of the impact of economic factors on individuals and on the society of which they are necessarily a part. He also demonstrates the importance of the Georgian social contract in its acceptance of "social mobility as the basis of individual and collective *soteria*". Austen is never too embarrassed to allow money its significance. At the close of *Persuasion*, for instance, she appears concerned to tie up economic loose

ends, as Captain Wentworth takes steps to help Anne Elliot's friend, Mrs Smith, recover her husband's property in the West Indies, and so enjoy a much-needed "improvement of income".

While Michael Giffin's study is a valuable guide to reading, understanding, and appreciating the achievement of Jane Austen's novels, from his most useful and informed perspective, such is her genius that she can never entirely be summed up by one critic or by one book. Austen's work continues to receive substantial critical attention, from a variety of perspectives. Other recent studies include Sarah Raff's *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice* (2014), a somewhat audacious book in which Raff contends that "the phenomenon of Janeism—both the exorbitant devotion that Austen inspires in her readers and the peculiar form this devotion often takes—is the consequence of Jane Austen's design". Tom Keymer's *Jane Austen: Writing, Society, Politics* (2020) provides a competent overview of her work which includes an analysis of her technical achievements in narration. And Inger Sigrun Brodekjaer Brodey's *Jane Austen and the Price of Happiness* (2024) is a study of the endings of Austen's novels. Brodey notes that "Austen's metafictional flourishes—where she makes us aware that we are reading a novel—increase as we approach the end of her novels. These features all share one effect: highlighting the fictionality of the novel."

And an evergreen volume of Austen criticism deserves mention at this point, Marvin Mudrick's *Jane Austen's Irony: Defense and Discovery* (1952, reissued 2018). Austen's splendidly ironic sense of humour is examined in this analysis and, indeed, it has been the focus of much literary criticism for many years. Austen can be so boldly, so wickedly

funny, pointing up humorous discrepancies in characters, in situations, and in society at large. Very little is sacred and thus exempt from her ironic gaze. A memorable example, perhaps on the edge of outrageousness, can be seen in *Persuasion*, when Captain Wentworth seeks to console the rather fat Mrs Musgrove for the death at sea of one of her sons:

Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for the self-command with which he attended to her large, fat sighings over the destiny of a son whom alive nobody had cared for. Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large, bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions.

Clearly, Austen delights in such comic discrepancy and has been unable to resist highlighting it here.

Jane Austen's popularity shows no signs of diminishing, as critical and creative tributes to her novels continue to be produced, even if some of those tributes risk getting too far away from her original work. Amongst the latest is a ten-part BBC drama series, due to be released later this year, based on Janice Hadlow's 2020 novel about Mary Bennet, *The Other Bennet Sister*. Austen might well think this is a case of her elvish followers exercising a great deal too much ingenuity!

Lyn Ashcroft has taught English language and literature at tertiary institutions in Australia, England and France. Her interests include literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and humour studies.

Of Sounds and Souls

The soul of the bell
abandoning the bell with
the knell of the bell.

The soul of a man—
attached and unattached, like
the toll of a bell.

Hiding in bronze,
a bell's peal—a man's soul
hiding in blood.

The soul of a man—
wholly immaterial, like
the sound of a bell.

Andrew Lansdown