

**Michael Giffin**

## **Jane Austen and the Hero Concept**

### **1.**

In my last talk—*Dramatic Structure in Austen’s Novels*—I introduced the following ideas:

- As Austen matured, she abandoned the exuberant and raucous Comedy of her Juvenilia.
- She adapted a theatrical form—Aristotle’s formula for Tragedy—for her purposes as a mature novelist, and this made her unique among her peers.
- By the Georgian period, Tragedy’s *catastrophe* had become Classicism’s *resolution* or *denouement*.
- Austen occupies a liminal space between Classicism and Romanticism, neither wholly one nor the other.

Today, I apply these ideas—in generalised terms—to what Austen does with the concept of the Hero.

Many years ago, a film clip was shown at a JASA conference. Bonnie Tyler’s “Holding Out for a Hero” was dubbed over a montage of film adaptations of Austen’s heroes. The clip was fun and bouncy—in a Chick.Lit kind of way—which told us a lot about popular culture and little about the hero’s role in Austen’s novels. I hope most of us here do not read Chick.Lit. Austen did not write Chick.Lit. She is far greater than Chick.Lit.

What does Austen expect from her readers? A clue comes from a 1813 letter to Cassandra, where Austen rewords a couplet from Scott’s “Marmion”: “I do not write for such dull Elves / As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves”.<sup>1</sup> She expects her readers to tell the difference between Willoughby and Colonel Brandon in *Sense and*

*Sensibility* and between Wickham and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. True, the world is full of dull elves, but the reader must know the difference between hero and villain. This becomes harder when the villain is a sexy bad boy and the hero is average and ordinary.

According to many accounts from evolutionary psychology and cultural anthropology, the hero concept evolved over millions of years. It is inseparable from how competence hierarchies evolved and how sexual selection occurred within them. Traditionally, the concept revolves around hypergamy, woman's need to marry as high up the competence hierarchy as she can, and man's ability to ward off other males. In other words, the hero concept once expressed a biological imperative.

This is all implied in Austen's famous universal truth: "a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." In her period, a woman needed a man as husband and father, for procreating and rearing. Human survival depended on it.

This truth is no longer universal. We are being habituated to the idea that biological imperatives either no longer exist or no longer matter. Women no longer need men. They can have it all without men. In literature and the arts, the girl meets boy theme has adapted to a new reality. Those who manoeuvre the levers of culture are preparing us for new variations of Chick.Lit: boy meets boy, girl meets girl, boy becomes girl, girl becomes boy. These politically-correct variations are already ubiquitous in Hollywood and popular culture. Transgender heroes will save us from the Zombie Apocalypse. But I digress.

## 2.

Once upon a time, until just the other day in fact, heroes were men. Over the millennia, patterns were noticed about the men who successfully climbed the competence hierarchy. Stories about these patterns were categorised

into admirable or non-admirable.

The most admirable was a hero, the man who rescued the virgin, killed whatever threatened her, and won the right to combine his genes with hers. The hero embodied the virtue of telling the truth. His opposite, the villain, embodied the vice of telling lies. So, one way of recognising heroes and villains in an Austen novel is noticing the difference between those who tell the truth and those who tell lies.

This distinction is complicated when the dramatic action—its trajectory—has the truth unfolding gradually as the plot develops. In an Austen novel, the truth does not begin to emerge until the moment of dramatic recognition or critical discovery—what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis*—and it remains partial and incomplete until the *resolution* or *denouement*. Another complication is that the villain can be more compelling than the hero. In many cases, the villain is much sexier and compelling than the hero, so what happens then? Austen is clear eyed about this. Her heroines need husbands but the marriage market is treacherous and the heroine needs to negotiate it. Your mothers are good examples of this need.

If the idea that woman has choices when choosing a mate—hypergamy—was not theorised in evolutionary psychology until after Austen, its truth was everywhere. She knew woman needed man as husband and father but equally the relationship between man and woman is asymmetrical. They occupy separate domains which are complementary. They fit together. According to every form of knowledge available to Austen, men and women are made for each other. This universal truth is the source of all Tragedy, and all Comedy too.

Austen explores this tragicomic complementarity in a narrative form unique to literary fiction by following the structure hitherto found in dramatic art. For example, compare her first novel offered for publication, *Northanger*

*Abbey*, with Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a novel with no dramatic structure to speak of, which presents itself as a horizontal chain of incident, an exercise in mood. Its hero, Valancourt, is indeed charming, agreeable and handsome but his character does not develop. He is simply either onstage or offstage, as it were, waiting to be united with the heroine at the end.

For their part, Austen's heroes must change and grow. They must rise to challenges, be instrumental in fixing the disorder—described in the exposition—around which the action of each novel revolves. Further, and most important, they must learn to understand the heroine's complementary role in this reordering. This means the hero must change and grow. And this change and growth is accomplished within an observable dramatic structure. Since Austen's sense of the hero concept grew as her literary sense matured, we begin with *Northanger Abbey*, last to be published, first to be written.

### 3.

The primary theme of *Northanger Abbey* is establishing what the heroine calls "her future good", an effective marriage between Catherine and Henry. In the novel, Austen wrote against the stereotypical heroine and hero of her period. The "almost pretty" Catherine is more like an ordinary young woman. The "not quite handsome" Henry is more like an ordinary young man.

Before Catherine can marry, she must learn to interpret correctly. Austen distinguishes Catherine's real vulnerability as a young woman from the imagined vulnerability of a Gothic heroine. If Catherine does not always interpret correctly, she always behaves appropriately. She deserves credit for successfully negotiating every challenge the novel throws at her, apart from General Tilney, whose authority and influence make him difficult to negotiate.

There is a frankness about Catherine's character which Austen contrasts with the lack of frankness in other characters. Most of her problems arise because she takes what others say at face value. The novel is filled with examples of Catherine asking for plain-English answers to plain-English questions. Instead she gets arch pleasantries, polite civilities, ambiguous ironies, or banal inanities, all of which she finds hard to interpret. Apart from her parents at home, most adults she meets in Bath and Northanger speak with a forked tongue.

Henry is a protagonist rather than a hero. He consistently refuses to exert a heroic influence over Catherine. Instead, he wants her to want him, hints at the truth about persons and events, but rarely about himself, and manifests the occasional pique whenever she fails to behave the way he believes she should or fails to interpret events and people from his point of view.

Catherine cannot rely on others to tell her what is right or wrong, what her response to people or situations ought to be, or how she can best negotiate her "future good". No one can help her, neither Mr and Mrs Allen, her hands-off chaperones, nor Henry and Eleanor Tilney, her true friends. Indeed, interpreting Henry is as challenging as interpreting any other character.

Austen tells us that, at seventeen, Catherine has an "ignorant and uninformed" mind (10), but she is quick to learn from her mistakes, and her judgment is sometimes more incisive than the more-knowing Henry's. Indeed, apart from the occasional lapse, she can hold her own against him and, despite his politeness and correctness, she has much to teach him about emotional integrity.

Henry only approaches hero status when he proposes to Catherine near the end of the novel, on recognizing how badly his father treated her, on realizing his responsibility towards her, on admitting to feeling an attachment to her after she spent most of the novel pursuing him at her own

risk. Even here Austen deprives him of full hero status, by admitting his affection for her “originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought” (252–253).

Austen explains why she allowed this indignity to occur: “It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own” (253). Austen always has her eye on the reality of ordinary life, including the indignity of being a vulnerable young woman who must negotiate a competitive and ruthless marriage market if she is to survive. Catherine had to run after Henry, while Henry studiously behaved like an object of worth and gave her little assistance. If this seems unfair, to us, the Georgians had other ideas about fairness.



The first and last chapters of each Austen novel frame the allegory or parable of the intervening chapters. In *Sense and Sensibility* the primary moral is what happens when biblical injunctions pertaining to widows and orphans are disobeyed. If Elinor and Marianne are not responsible for the evil at the heart of their social disadvantage, they are responsible for the ways in which they manage it. Despite the emotional cost of guarding her feelings, and checking her enthusiasm, Elinor does this better than Marianne.

What hypergamous choices are available to the Dashwood sisters? Where are the males around them warding off other males? Although Austen wrote before Nietzsche, Freud and Jung, Marianne’s idealistic Romanticism can be usefully understood as a form of adolescent sublimation she must grow out of before she

can successfully negotiate the adult world. Early in the novel, Sir John Middleton laughs off her reproof of his vulgar reference to her alleged hypergamy and makes a prescient observation: “Aye, you will make conquests enough, I dare say, one way or another. Poor Brandon! He is quite smitten already, and he is very well worth setting your cap at, I can tell you, in spite of all this tumbling about and spraining of ancles [sic]” (54).

Austen bursts the bubble of Marianne’s Romantic ideals because they are inherently dangerous. Willoughby sweeps her off her feet, literally. He appears like a knight in shining armour but turns out to be a villain. Colonel Brandon is the real knight, although his armour is a flannel waistcoat. Marianne thinks flannel is what old people wear, although he is still relatively young, and flannel is a sensuous fabric.

The image of Colonel Brandon as a knight in sensuous flannel is hard to sell. Female readers have desires like Marianne’s, as the lyrics of Bonnie Tyler’s hero song suggest: I’m holding out for a hero, god-like, streetwise Hercules, strong, fast, fresh from the fight, larger than life, a wild fantasy, reaching back to me, a superman to sweep me off my feet.

Austen manoeuvres Marianne through this fantasy. Having successfully come-of-age, after a period of trial, Marianne succumbs to an “extraordinary fate”. At the age of nineteen, after discovering the falsehood of her opinions, and counter-acting her favourite maxims, she found herself “a wife, mistress of a family, and patroness of a village” (430).

In *Jane Austen and Food* (1995), Maggie Lane provides an illuminating description of Marianne’s fate, which highlights the symbolism of a mulberry tree in Delaford’s garden:

A mulberry tree takes a very long time to come to fruition. So does Colonel Brandon, who is thirty-eight when he marries Marianne, and, if they are

to have a family, as they surely are, will be in his forties when his children are born. Though we are to presume a monkish celibacy about his early life, he is not as dried up as Marianne first presumes him to be. Is there even a promise of sexual pleasure for her in that “Lord! how Charlotte and I did stuff?” Readers who have felt uneasy about the docility with which Marianne allows herself to be married off to Colonel Brandon in the last few pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, should think back and take comfort from the mulberry tree (145).

Colonel Brandon has survived Romanticism’s dark side and is still Romantic. His love of Eliza Williams Sr and guardianship of Eliza Williams Jr taught him the value of self-control. He understands Marianne’s emotions; he shares them himself. This is what makes him a perfect husband for her, although she had to mature first.



Charlotte Lucas is not offended by Mr Darcy’s pride. She thinks he has a right to be proud, with his handsome looks, family, fortune, and everything in his favour. “That is very true,” replied Elizabeth, “and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*” (21). Later, at the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth wonders why Darcy is looking at her and vows to give him a hard time: “He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him” (26). This is her first impression of a man whose inheritance, although it has no title attached to it, places him near the top of the dominance hierarchy, higher than many in the nobility.

Later, while Elizabeth is still nursing Jane at Netherfield, Darcy notes there is a tendency towards some evil in each person which even the best education cannot overcome. Elizabeth tells him his defect is a propensity to hate everyone. “And yours,” he replied with a smile, “is wilfully to misunderstand them” (63).

Darcy is right. Elizabeth wilfully misunderstands him



until the climax, the shapely turn into the falling action, after which she is forced into a period of recognition about how wrong she was about him and how dysfunctional her family really is. What should she do? What can she do?

Elizabeth is struggling to balance natural selection and biblical imperatives. Darcy proposed to her despite his “sense of her inferiority”, and the degrading behaviour of her family, which his “judgment had always opposed to inclination” (211). He wants her without her family. According to the laws of hypergamy, he expects her to turn her back on them. Elizabeth’s reply is “do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?” (213).

Elizabeth’s loyalty to her dysfunctional family made Darcy blush and caught him unprepared. Refuting her charge, and atoning for it, will be difficult, as she has struck a chord. In his letter of justification, he claims to have separated Bingley and Jane because he could not see in Jane any “peculiar regard” by which she returned Bingley’s obvious affection for her (219). He claims to be shielding his friend from hurt. Now that Darcy cannot obtain Elizabeth’s love through the laws of hypergamy, he must try other means.

Darcy must now behave heroically in a manner that does not reinforce the narrative of pride or prejudice. He does this in two ways: first, by restoring Lydia to her family; second, by reuniting Bingley and Jane. As Darcy remains silent about his heroism, Elizabeth does not understand, until after her encounter with Lady Catherine, that he is shy. He does not expect her gratitude, even though he has done everything in his power to behave the way she said he should, to become acceptable to her.

Gradually, Elizabeth’s attitude towards Darcy changes from contempt in Volume I to ambivalence in Volume II to

gratitude in Volume III. According to John Gregory's female conduct manual, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), gratitude is a precondition for female love and successful marriage. Naturally, feminist readers object to such an idea, and refuse to interpret Elizabeth's gratitude this way. Yet Austen was not a feminist in our sense of the term. This is another example of the difference between her world and ours.



The first and last chapters of *Mansfield Park* frame a parable about reordering a morally disordered Estate and Parish, as metaphors for State and Church. This was a commonplace theme in Austen's period. Secondary themes within the parable are the struggle between good and evil, and the difference between a formal education and the formation of a Christian conscience. Such an allegorical reading of the novel depends on three tropes: Sir Thomas Bertram as a flawed authority figure, an "absentee landlord" who evolves from Deism to Theism; Fanny Price as an icon of redemptive suffering who becomes the novel's moral conscience; and Edmund Bertram as a representative of a Georgian Church being seduced by the world. There is no heroism in this novel but lots of villainy.

In *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830* (1991), Paul Johnson suggests that Sir Thomas was forced to reorder his plantations in Antigua to comply with the *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807)*, lest he be threatened with transportation to Botany Bay. He was gone longer than expected. On his return, he found his Estate threatened with moral disorder from the staging of *Lovers' Vows*, a play about extra-marital sex and illegitimacy. From that moment he turns his gaze towards his niece, Fanny, the only character who objected to the

staging of the play.

After the climactic game of Speculation, during the unravelling, Sir Thomas hands his niece to Henry Crawford for testing, as God hands Job to Satan for testing. As part of this testing, Fanny is banished to her birth home in Portsmouth where she has a wilderness experience, coinciding with Lent, echoing the gospel accounts of the Spirit leading or driving Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of fasting and temptation. After Easter, coinciding with Pentecost and Ascension, Fanny is returned to Mansfield figuratively risen, ascended, glorified. Sir Thomas realises something “must have been wanting *within*”. Because of his “grievous mismanagement” (535), his children were well educated but never taught to practise their religion.

Fanny is not a protagonist in a love story. Neither heroine nor hero, she is a trope in a religious allegory. Throughout the novel, she remains unnaturally self-effacing because, according to a biblical precept, she has come to serve not to be served (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45).

During the complication, she is mocked at Mansfield because she has no formal education, but she brings something it lacks, a moral conscience, a spirit of brotherly love. During the unravelling, she must choose between good and evil. Her brother has given her an amber cross, to wear at her first ball. Crawford and Edmund both give her a chain for it. Henry’s chain does not fit the cross, so she can wear Edmund’s chain with a clear conscience. Crawford wants to marry Fanny although he does not know what love means. She cannot love Crawford any more than Jesus can love Satan. She loves Edmund but cannot admit this to anyone, even to herself.

Edmund’s establishment as resident priest in Thornton Lacey is central to Sir Thomas’s plans for

reordering his disordered Estate and Parish. Austen creates a drama around Edmund's vocation, through his infatuation with Mary Crawford, who intends to sabotage it. The issue at stake, which Austen was acutely aware of, is the kind of pluralism that encourages the abuse of absentee livings by clergy more worldly than pastoral.

Mary's interest in Edmund as a potential husband is not about love. It is because he is a Bertram of Mansfield. It is contingent upon making him a worldly, absentee, pluralist clergyman. Mary tells Edmund he has "limited means and indifferent connections" with relations "who are in no situation to do anything for you" (249). If this is true, she misses the point, which is not about prosperous connections but the integrity of his clerical vocation. The scales fall from his eyes, finally and completely, when he realises her total lack of moral sense and unsuitability to be a clergy wife. Fortunately, Fanny will be the perfect clergy wife.



The parable of *Emma*, another "mature" novel from Austen's Chawton period, illustrates the struggle to balance natural selection with biblical imperatives. Mr Knightley is the local squire and top of the dominance hierarchy. Emma's *anagnorisis*, her ultimate recognition that she wants him as a husband (444), only occurs when she is threatened by a threat of her own making, Harriet Smith. Throughout the novel, Emma constructs a false reality in which Knightley must remain single because she wishes to remain single. According to evolutionary theory, this is not "natural".

Knightley represents the Capitalist-cum-Christian context of the Georgian social contract, which promotes upward social mobility over time, through a culturally recognised process Emma subverts. They cannot marry

until Emma's subversion stops. Knightley has been a wise-uncle figure to Emma all her life, monitoring her social behaviour and pointing out her errors of judgment. Emma finds this galling, even though he is usually right. The erotic tension between them echoes Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, with echoes of Petruchio in Knightley and Katherina in Emma.

Whenever Knightley criticizes Emma, she lashes out. They disagree over a difficult yet undefined concept: "openness of temper". This is not candour, in our sense of the term. Candour had a different meaning in Austen's period. Neither is it enthusiasm, of which Austen disapproved. Openness of temper is not the sensibility, emotion, feeling, or authenticity promoted by Romanticism. It could imply frankness or transparency. Emma dislikes Jane Fairfax because her reserve prevents Emma from "reading" her (218). Jane's secret engagement violates Emma's sense of openness (427–437), yet Jane's reserve is understandable, and Emma just wants Jane to remain more vulnerable than she is.

Knightley believes an open temper is desirable in a wife (311). He is a hero, not in the Classical sense of Mr Darcy, who comes to the rescue, or the Romantic sense of Colonel Brandon, who vigils patiently in his flannel waistcoat, but as a truth-teller. He warns Emma to let Mr Elton choose his own wife (12). When he discovers Emma has subverted Robert Martin's proposal, given Harriet ideas above her station, and presumed Martin to be beneath her acquaintance, Knightley unsuccessfully tries to give her a reality check (65–69).

When Knightley suspects Emma is trying to match Harriet with Mr Elton, he warns "it will be all labour in vain" (69), since Elton is not likely to make an imprudent match, knows the value of a good income, will act rationally, and will not "throw himself away" (70). Knightley believes Jane's social choices are narrow

because Emma does not pay Jane her due (308). None of Knightley's truth-telling hits home until he admonishes Emma for mocking Miss Bates (402–409) and she realises Harriet has set her eyes on Knightley and thinks Harriet has a chance of success (444).

Emma uses her social influence in non-biblical ways. Knightley has a stronger and more biblical sense of right and wrong. Unlike Emma, he does not live in an imagined world of his own construction or meddles with other people's lives. He walks among his people, encourages their self-reliance and social welfare, and superintends the parish's poor relief.

When delineating her protagonists, Austen maintains the complementarity between the sexes. Knightley's belief that Emma is faultless despite her faults suggests she possesses something he lacks and needs. His fault, jealousy of Frank Churchill, is quite Romantic because it is a reaction to his love of Emma, and his desire for domestic comfort. After the Box Hill excursion, he decided to go away, and try to learn to be indifferent: "But he had gone to the wrong place. There was too much domestic happiness in his brother's house; woman wore too amiable a form in it; Isabella was too much like Emma" (471).



In *Persuasion* we see Austen's most complex interrogation of the hero concept. Although Anne and Frederick are in love, she was talked out of marrying him because a family confidante, Lady Russell, did not regard him as a suitable choice. Frederick goes to sea, becomes Captain Wentworth, makes prize money, and becomes an eligible bachelor.

In this novel, the naval interests displace the landed interests of previous novels. Through the novel's naval

marriages and engagements, Austen explores the globalising territory of a society in transition. If Anne had accepted Charles Musgrove's proposal, she could have become an essential part of the Musgrove–Hayter alliance emerging around Uppercross and Winthrop, which represents a better social and economic model than the effete and decaying establishment of Kellynch Hall under her father. However, Anne is destined for better things.

In an Austen novel, before an ideal marriage can occur, the future husband and wife undergo steep learning curves. In *Persuasion*, Anne must learn to focus on a pragmatic, healthy self-interest and Frederick must correct his overly strong belief in himself. In theory, he becomes a hero by successfully climbing the dominance hierarchy. In practice, that does not make him a hero. Austen's sense of female complementarity means Frederick must realise Anne is also part of the hero formulae.

This becomes obvious at the novel's climax, Louisa's fall from the Cobb, which marks the turning point from the complication to the unravelling. After the fall, Anne's competence, seldom admitted by her own family, is suddenly recognized by others. As Louisa lays lifeless in Frederick's arms, everyone around them is succumbing to the horror of the moment, including Frederick (118).

Anne suggests getting a surgeon. As Frederick darts away, she eagerly suggests Captain Benwick goes instead: "He knows where a surgeon is to be found" (119). After Benwick rushes off, all eyes turn towards her as the question is asked: "What, in heaven's name, is to be done next?" (120).

During Anne's exchange with Captain Harville, we see a Georgian version of what later becomes D.H. Lawrence's "aesthetics of generation": the female will-to-inertia and the male will-to-motion; the necessary role the axle and hub play in the wheel of life. Anne is emphatic about men

and women operating in different provinces; a man in the world, a woman in the home. Women live at home, “quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us.” Men are forced on exertion, “You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions” (253). She is soon proven wrong.

Austen grooms Anne to follow the model set by Lady Russell’s opposite, Frederick’s eponymous sister. Sophia (Σοφία = Wisdom) is a strong-minded woman who married for love, manages her husband intelligently, and occasionally reaches out to steer the gig to avoid the dung cart (99). She was prepared to take risks Lady Russell persuaded Anne against taking, in marrying quickly and not having a long engagement.

The Crofts were also prepared to take risks Frederick has yet to be persuaded to take: encouraging wives to live aboard ship with their husbands. Such naval couples are therefore “at home” anywhere in the world, on land or sea, during war or peace, as long as they are together. In that global home there are complementary exchanges of power and influence. This is clearly an expansion of the traditional male and female provinces.

Two of Austen’s brothers were naval officers. The naval life captured her imagination. She viewed it as an opportunity for new expressions of male and female complementarity. Sophia and Anne prove that, within their widening province, women are as rational and can command as well as men. Men are competent in commanding their ships at sea. Women are competent in their domestic province.





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<sup>1</sup> Letters.