The Making of Jane Austen

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The Night of the Divine Jane

Men's Club Clashes and Politics in the Periodical Press

High-profile Victorian and turn-of-the-century men were deeply committed to securing Austen's reputation. That made her, for a time, the darling of discerning male literati—at least according to the literati themselves.[1] We can see its effects in microcosm in an anecdote of 1920s expatriate Paris. The Canadian novelist John Glassco writes about having been an uninvited guest at a party hosted by American author Gertrude Stein. It was quite a party to crash. Dada artist Man Ray was there, at one point holding forth about his enthusiastic discovery of Jane Austen's novels. He was thinking about doing an imaginary portrait of her, he told fellow party guests. In his image of her, she'd be wearing a long white dress, looking at a mushroom, and, he said, "the focus of the whole thing will be the mushroom . . . It represents the almost overnight flowering of her genius—also its circumscribed quality, its suggestion of being both sheltered *and* a shelter."[2]

Glassco listened attentively to Ray's odd description of how he'd depict Jane Austen, in a portrait that would feature mannish trees, simmering sexuality, and possibly some elves and witches. Not everyone listening was amused, however. A tweedy Englishman opined, "You are talking of Jane Austen and sex, gentlemen? That dried-up lady snob lived behind lace curtains all her life . . . Isn't that so, Gertrude?" (Glassco 81). Then Stein approached the group.

She asked Glassco, "Do I know you? . . . No, I suppose you are just one of those silly young men who admire Jane Austen."

Glassco replied, "Yes, I am . . . And I suppose you are just one of those silly old women who don't."

Stein turned on her heels and walked away. The tweedy man threw Glassco out (81).

Did young men admire Jane Austen more than old women did in the 1920s? If it were true—something that's not at all clear—pigeonholing her devotees based on sex is a phenomenon that had begun many years earlier. They were first stereotyped as male. In 1870, the same year that J. E. Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* of his aunt was published, reviewer H. Lawrenny suggests that men who loved Jane Austen were an already-formed subgroup. Lawrenny writes, "Miss Austen has always been *par excellence* the favorite author of literary men. The peculiar merits of her style are recognized by all, but, with the general mass of readers, they have never secured what can fairly be called popularity."[3] The "general mass of readers" would seem, in this formulation, to include all women and nonliterary men. Amusingly, this reviewer was a woman. Lawrenny was an early pseudonym of Edith Simcox (1844–1901), the prolific essayist and early feminist.[4] Apparently, for a time, even an educated woman could see educated men as Austen's most enthusiastic reader class.

Lawrenny isn't alone in this opinion. Scots literary critic Andrew Lang voices a similar view a decade on. In his imaginary letter to Austen in *Letters to Dead Authors* (1886), he tells her, "You are not a very popular author: your volumes are not found in gaudy covers on every bookstall; or, if found, are not perused with avidity by the Emmas and Catherines of our generation" (76). For Lang and others, knowing and loving Austen marked a reader as a member of an exclusive male enclave. Austen was happily inaccessible to the less-discerning, naïve female readers, a group he seems to imply wouldn't properly appreciate her anyway. There are definitely age- and class-based inflections at work in all of this stereotyping as well. But in the midst of Austen's apotheosis among the (young? middle-aged?) male establishment, her name, image, writings, and characters began to attract young female readers, too—Lang's dreaded Emmas and Catherines. These two groups, well-heeled men and upstart women of a wider range of class backgrounds, both read and loved Austen. But they didn't always see eye to eye, and factions sparred. Today it might all seem very Darcy and Elizabeth. In this case, however, the pride and prejudice involved was not inclined toward an enlightened meeting of the minds. It was more like a war of ideas. At issue was not just to whom Austen belonged but whose view of her life and her fiction's political meanings would prove more persuasive and lasting.

In this chapter, I refer to "men's club Janeites" as a shorthand for the attitudes expressed by the likes of Andrew Lang. A number of the period's culture-making men saw themselves as the keepers of Jane Austen's eternal

flame. They express no small amount of anxiety that others not like them will discover or claim her, as well as a fear that others like them won't. The anxiety was actually well-founded on both counts. Like Lang, some of the literati imagined the Emmas and Catherines as rare reader-enemies. By 1900, rarity could no longer be alleged. Girls and women had discovered Austen en masse, especially, as we've seen, on the stage and in the Christmas book market. But whether these readers deserved to be imagined as enemies or friends by those who imagined Austen as their longtime property was another matter. Not all elite literati in the Anglosphere belonged to men's clubs, not all men's clubs were politically homogenous, and not all elite literati were men. As for the Emmas and Catherines—as their Austenian fictional names seem to imply—they certainly came from varying economic circumstances. Could they properly appreciate her? A professed love of Austen had become deeply political.

The longstanding caricature of Jane Austen as an apolitical writer was based in *something*, some set of widely held beliefs about her and her writings. In trying to make sense of it, we might start first with the question of how one defines "politics." If we define it narrowly, in an understanding that the *Oxford English Dictionary* labels as "the science or study of government and the state," then Austen's surviving writings can hardly be said to engage contemporary politics frequently, directly, or intentionally.[5] She might mention a county magistrate (*Emma*'s Mr. Knightley), joke about adding a chapter on Napoleon to *Pride and Prejudice* (truly a lost opportunity for hilarity!), or wryly describe a member of Parliament in her letters, but her fiction is not heavily invested in statecraft. Yet if one means by politics "actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority" (following a secondary definition in the *OED*), then Austen may appear one of our *most* political novelists. The *OED* tells us that both definitions of politics were current in Austen's era and thereafter.

Today's understandings of Austen as a political author follow the second definition. It has become common to regard her fiction as commenting on the exercise of power, status, and authority, particularly in regard to families, economics, and gender roles. We sometimes mistakenly believe that our generation deserves credit for first recognizing the Political Austen. We view the present or the recent past as responsible for it, spurred on by late twentieth-century feminist literary criticism, by Marxism and cultural studies, or by postcolonial criticism in the wake of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Imagining these origins for Austen's political reputation, however,

could not be more wrong. Once again, there is a longer and largely untold history of making Jane Austen mean something more (or something else) in the service of one's preferred dogma.

During the period 1870–1940, as B. C. Southam rightly concludes, "Austen was enrolled in many causes and seen in conflicting roles—sometimes as heroine of the feminists, sometimes as a champion of domestic values."[6] We ought to describe this "enrolling" for what it was—the profound politicization of her life and writings. For conservatives, men and women alike, Austen supported the notion that seeking any kind of cultural and political change in gender roles was wrongheaded. Austen stood as a beacon of past political sanity, contrasted to present political lunacy, especially where women, men, and relationships were concerned. She harkened back to what was imagined as a less complicated and more right-thinking time for courtship and marriage, when women belonged in the home and men in the wider world. She was particularly embraced by the most highly placed of those men in the wider world. Austen was, for a time, an incredibly popular figure in London's ubiquitous private men's clubs, where men of privilege ate, drank, sang, recited, argued and generally escaped from their domestic or professional lives.

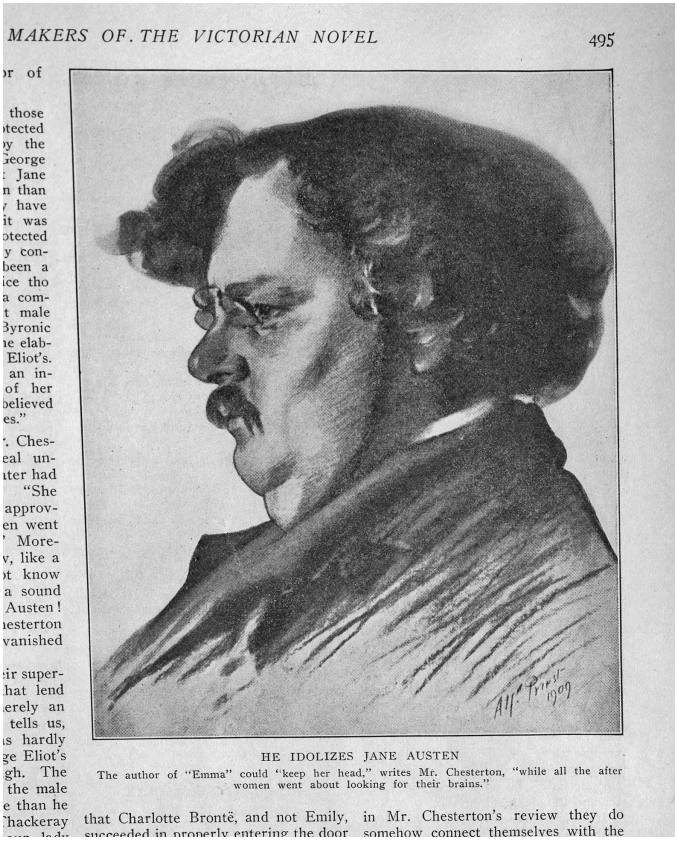
Southam's *Critical Heritage* volumes catch some of the flavor. In the early twentieth century, men who criticized Austen were engaging in a dangerous activity, or so novelist Arnold Bennett (1867–1931) claims. In 1927, Bennett wrote in his column in the conservative London newspaper the *Evening Standard*, "The reputation of Jane Austen is surrounded by cohorts of defenders who are ready to do murder for their sacred cause. They are nearly all fanatics." He continued, "They will not listen. If anybody 'went for' Jane, anything might happen to him. He would assuredly be called on to resign from his clubs. I do not want to resign from my clubs. I would sooner perjure myself."[7] Not willing to label Austen "great," Bennett saw her instead as a "great little novelist," admitting that he usually prevaricates in conversation with his highly placed male club friends, feigning a reverence for her, rather than speak the unpopular truth of his actual views. He suggests that his private men's clubs are filled with members who think "Jane Austen was the only estimable author who ever lived."[8] Southam includes Bennett's piece in *The Critical Heritage*, under the heading "a great little novelist" (2:viii).

Bennett's dismissive description of Austen and of the knight-errant, Austen-loving male reader were caricatures, but he was responding to what had been described as a long tradition of Austen-loving men and to highly placed male champions of Austen. Among these champions we ought to

count George Saintsbury (1845–1933), the Edinburgh professor said to have coined the term "Janeite."[9] He also names Austen the "mother of the nineteenth century novel."[10] William Dean Howells, dubbed Austen's "foremost American champion," calls her "the divine Jane."[11] Oxford professor A. C. Bradley has been called (exaggeratedly) "the starting point for the serious academic approach to Jane Austen."[12] These and other Austen standard-bearers made revering Austen de rigueur among the male cultural elite. Apparently they also made club life rather uncomfortable for men like Bennett, who did not share their zeal.

Any list of the era's most zealous men's club Janeites must also rank G. K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton (1874–1936) very highly.[13] In his essay "On Jane Austen in the General Election" (1929), Chesterton explains away progressive and feminist understandings of Austen with the imputation that anyone who holds them either has not read her or has not read her well.[14] Chesterton sets himself up as the right (political) reader of her novels and her characters. Chesterton, a public figure who delivered speeches on contemporary issues, had long made Jane Austen one of his favorite touchstones, using her to communicate his dim view of expanding women's education and rights. It's an odd thing to happen to a nineteenth-century author who was then believed by many (Chesterton included) as entirely uninvested in politics.

When Chesterton toured the United States in 1930, one newspaper ran a headline "Chesterton Thinks Women Will Tire of New Freedom," with the subtitle, "Place Is in the Home."[15] For Chesterton, Austen's fiction was on the front lines of this battle. For him, it advocated against any kind of social change, particularly for women. We see this in his essay "The Evolution of Emma," where he offers up heroine Emma Woodhouse as Austen's cautionary tale against both strong women and political movements that seek freedoms for those who are allegedly unready for them, such as working-class women.[16] In Chesterton's reading, Emma learns that the social order belongs just as it was, because those who go mucking about with it only harm those they would help. Chesterton's Austen shows readers how to stay in their (class-based, gendered) places. His Emma teaches us to resist social change. There are, of course, other ways to understand the positions that Emma comes around to by the novel's end. In any case, Chesterton was a controversial figure. Some years earlier, the periodical *Current Opinion* expressed itself unsympathetic to Chesterton's "medieval" and "gloriously fantastic" conservative views on women; it ran an illustration of him in its June 1913 issue with the caption, "He Idolizes Jane Austen."[17] For a set of powerful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HE IDOLIZES JANE AUSTEN

The author of "Emma" could "keep her head," writes Mr. Chesterton, "while all the after women went about looking for their brains."

Figure 8.1. G. K. Chesterton, "He Idolizes Jane Austen," in *Current Opinion* 54, no. 6 (June 1913): 495, by Alfred Priest.

male readers of the time, the two opinions were very much related: to idolize Austen and to hold conservative views on women's rights and roles went hand in hand. There was nowhere better for such men to express and argue over these views than in tony private men's clubs.

Several factors came together to make Austen popular in "Very Important Men's Clubs."[18] One was the fashionability of recognizing her fictional powers, proving one's aesthetic good judgement. Another was that Austen and her heroine-creations were widely seen as romantically (if not sexually) attractive to men. Saintsbury believed that there were a handful of female protagonists with whom it might be a pleasure to fall in love, but none rose above Elizabeth Bennet "to live with and to marry."[19] As a reviewer

points out, Saintsbury "waxes almost erotic."[20] The shared private judgments meant that public pronouncements—establishment critics publishing in establishment periodicals—often read like clubby, knowing in-speak. Disagreements about her politics were there, but they were expressed in a shockingly small range, from "she had none" to "she was conservative." Some, like liberal politician and essayist Goldwin Smith (1823–1910), saw Austen's fiction as having "not the slightest tinge of politics," her "general tendencies" "evidently conservative," although with "a flash of something like Radical sympathy with the oppressed governess."[21] R. Brimley Johnson (1867–1932) thought Austen represented "unaggressive conventionalism and conservatism."[22] With few exceptions, the way these club men loved Austen mirrored the ways they approved of women's roles in their own time. For those traditionalist men who appreciated her, Austen and her fiction were to be celebrated not only in spite of her being limited but *because she upheld limits*.

Men's expressing a common love of Austen could be an act not only demonstrating their collective opposite-sex attraction to her or their mutually held views of her fiction's achievement as it mirrored proper sex roles, but also an act of homosocial bonding. As Claudia L. Johnson rightly puts it, "Austen's novels appear often to have facilitated rather than dampened conversation between men."[23] Johnson's work troubles over an emerging undercurrent of these conversations that serves to contextualize a minority of male Austen-haters. She examines how anti-Janeite men, like Mark Twain, imply that a man who enjoyed Austen was engaging in an unmanly activity, marking any devotee of hers as a "pansy."[24] Some anti-Janeites would have had it that a shared male love of Austen stemmed from men's wish to romance *each other*. Johnson's exploration of the queerness of Austen's legacy is a groundbreaking one. It does, however, leave further areas for investigation. Another way to get at the complicated status of Austen among elite men during this period is to study the conversations, images, and arguments about her that arose in the context of an actual turn-of-the-century men's club.

On May 27, 1902, an evening dinner and lecture were organized by a prominent private men's club, the Sette of Odd Volumes, for its forty-two members and their male guests. The Sette was a social and dining club for enthusiasts of the "writing, illustrating, and publishing of books."[25] Since its establishment in 1878, the Sette had dined together once a month, although arguing, drinking, singing, and other antics seem to have been as important as the food and sharing of ideas. The Sette's famous members included Sir Edward Sullivan (of Book of Kells fame), the publisher John Lane, and

Vyvyan Holland, son of Oscar Wilde.[26] Prominent guests in 1902 included Bram Stoker, various knights, and a viscount.[27] The dinner on May 27, 1902, became known in the club's privately printed records as the Night of the Divine Jane. But the Sette's Night of Divine Jane was not an homage. It was, as we'll see, designed as a Janeite takedown.

The Sette's evenings included collectible menus.[28] "The Divine Jane: Domine" features an illustration of Jane Austen in ruins.[29] It is an illustration drawn by Sette member John Hassall (1868–1948). He's been called the "epitome of the good all round English clubman," a hail-fellow-well-met heavy drinker, who later became known as the "Poster King" (Cuppleditch, *London* 78, 81–82). Recently widowed and spending his evenings in all-male company, Hassall was a commercial artist of great industry, who regularly designed menus, invitations, and logos for a number of his clubs (72–73). He had a fun-loving or eccentric side and enjoyed dressing up, whether as a police officer, a Turkish refugee, or as St. George, in a costume made out of old biscuit tins (70, 78). He was also very industrious. Hassall produced during this period some six to seven hundred commercial posters and eight hundred book covers, as well as two hundred book illustration commissions (75, 79). His Jane Austen menu illustration for the Sette—previously unnoticed by scholars, perhaps because it was privately printed—makes clear how fraught a subject Austen's political reputation had become in turn-of-the-century men's clubs.

Hassall chose to create for this menu a busted bust of Austen.[30] In Hassall's illustration, a disheveled, large-eared, and comic-looking maid looks askance at a broken Austen bust, fallen from a book title–filled plinth. Hassall was known for his sense of humor, so whatever else this image is, it was certainly an irreverent Austen send-up. The maid, as she stands in front of the Club's signature "O V" symbol, looks squarely at the place where Austen's head had been. The first bits of "broken Jane" have been swept up, but other pieces lie scattered on the floor. The image is ambiguous. It may suggest the maid is responsible for the mess. If so, then Austen is being ruined for the (male) elite by the (female) working classes. But if the maid is cleaning up someone else's mess, then Austen's head has been smashed by some other force. It's unsettling that the maid's head is just to the right of where Austen's would be if it were still attached at the shoulders. The visual play encourages us to imagine the maid's head atop the plinth, and her cap even resembles the one from Austen's imaginary portrait. The maid carries in her pocket a menu, positioned as a parallel to the names of Austen's six novels, mentioned oppo-

site. If Hassall's image is any kind of homage to a "Divine" Jane, it's an odd one, in that it depicts her destruction, whether by the maid (or the working classes) or by the privileged men whose maids clean up their messes.

Hassall's other artwork doesn't give us much guidance on how to read this image. The image most associated with him is his "jolly fisherman" for *Skegness Is So Bracing* (1908), an influential design purchased by the Great Northern Railway.[31] The poster was commissioned to attract tourists to travel by train to a struggling seaside resort, in an echo of Jane Austen's

Figure 8.2. "The Divine Jane: Domine," *The 236th Meeting of the Sette of Odd Volumes: 27 May 1902* (London: Sette of Odd Volumes, 1902), menu by John Hassall.

unfinished seaside novel *Sanditon* that can only make us smirk. Hassall specialized in humorous designs and "wasn't concerned with politics," according to his biographer (Cuppleditch, *John* 93). But that doesn't mean that the Austen menu is devoid of political import. The more we learn about the evening for which Hassall designed the menu, the more Hassall's ruined Austen seems highly politicized.

A further and crucial piece of evidence is the fact that lectures were always featured at the Sette's dinners. Hassall's busted Jane was created in conjunction with that evening's scheduled talk, delivered by fellow Sette member Walter Frewen Lord (1861–1927).[32] The night was described as "The Divine Jane: Domine" because the word "domine" (meaning lord and master) was also Lord's club nickname. Lord was a literature and law man (Inner Temple), having been invalided out of the Civil Service in India. He would eventually leave London to become a history professor at the Durham College of Science at Newcastle-upon-Tyne.[33] It was with a historian's sensibility, and as a privileged, well-traveled man, that Lord approaches the subject of Austen's fiction. He found much to criticize in it in his lecture. For Lord, William Thackeray was the greatest novelist, the one most deserving of comparison to Shakespeare.[34] Austen, Lord thought, was overrated among his brethren. Lord would later publish an essay taking down the Austen-lovers Thomas Babington Macaulay and W. D. Howells. We get a sense of Lord's disdain for their praise when he asks, "But really? Shakespearean? Divine? Are there any two qualities more entirely lacking to Miss Austen?" (*Mirror* 79). It seems likely that on that night in 1902, Hassall knew that Lord's lecture was going to knock Austen's head off. Hassall created an image meant to accompany a rousing verbal depreciation.

The Sette of Odd Volumes, in addition to its privately printed menus, also privately published an annual *Year-Boke*. It is from that volume that an account of Lord's Austen lecture may be found. It reports that Lord spoke on "the merits and defects of 'The Divine Jane.'" He took the floor "with a narrow table in front of him, on which were displayed a set, uniformly bound, of the works of Jane Austen, with carefully arranged and disposed book-marks in each" (*Year-Boke* 16). Lord read aloud "illustrative extracts." He poked fun at Hassall's drawing, which he described as "representing an imaginary night of the *Dominie* [Lord] with a most Undivine Jane." Lord sarcastically declared himself "much offended" with the image, taking his revenge by reading what he himself called "a Paper of vast length and appalling dulness"

(17). He predicted his own poor performance as a lecturer. He reports that he prosed on "until his voice was drowned in universal execration" (18).

Lord did precisely what Arnold Bennett would later say he feared to do. He went into his men's club and prodded his Janeite friends with the sharp stick of an anti-Janeite lecture. He dared to criticize Jane Austen in front of his club men. After he spoke, there was a discussion. Records tell us that two guests declared against Lord's arguments, in "untimesly [*sic*]" and "unreformed" condemnation (*Year-Boke* 19). They reputedly pronounced Lord "Advocatus Diaboli"—devil's advocate—and wanted to retitle his paper "The Diabolic Dominie and the Divine Jane" (19). Not all in attendance were enraged, however. According to club records, one member mistakenly thought Lord must have been joking. Another confused Charlotte Brontë for Jane Austen. Yet another gave "a carefully prepared impromptu musical rendering of the spirit of Jane Austen's work" (20). The men argued. They laughed. No doubt some drank heavily. The night of the Divine Jane came to an end.

Lord's Austen-hating argument, however, lived on. What started as a confrontational lecture among forty men who met for a monthly dinner in a hotel ended up seeing print. A version of it was published in the periodical the *Nineteenth-Century and After*. In his published essay, Lord describes in specific terms his political motivations for writing. Lord was crafting an anti–women's fiction, anti–women's rights, and simply antiwoman argument, ostensibly in response to what he saw as wrongheaded in his brethren's Janeite assessments. In the print version, Lord imagines both his audience and Austen's enthusiasts in masculine terms. He complains that Austen's "devotees, more numerous with every year that passes by, stand round with drawn swords and compel our homage."[35] These devotees appear to Lord as multiplying Don Quixotes, protecting their beloved Jane Austen.

No matter how much Lord seeks to distance himself from the Austen-quixotic, his opinions have some *political* commonalities with these sword-drawn worshippers. Most, like him, imagine Austen as a "lady" who "wrote like a lady," finding her "ignorant . . . of what was really going on around her." Like them, Lord believed that Austen either ignored or was ignorant of war and that she deserves to be understood as small, limited, and apolitical. Where Lord differs from Janeites is that he does not conclude these things and then nevertheless argue *for* her greatness. To him, such "ignorance" precludes greatness. Lord describes Austen's ignorance in geography, naming places she never traveled to or mentioned: Japan, China, the South Seas.

He lists the world events of her day that form no part of her stories ("Jane" 666). For Lord, Austen's "smallness" is not a sign of miniature perfection or of artistry. He sees Austen's downsized fiction as a feminine limitation.

Lord makes his own politics clear. He continues, "All honour to her for not writing about what she did not understand," such as "an imaginary mutiny at sea" or an "imaginary conspiracy of the colored folk" (Lord, "Jane" 670). His male-centered conservativism and class- and race-based privilege and bigotry lead to his greatest problem with Austen's (female-authored) fiction. He opines that "each of her stories is exactly like the last, and that much of her narrative is hopelessly uninteresting" (669). Although he believes that she is as admirably conservative as he is, Lord finds her subject matter boring. In fact, he thinks her writings are boring *of necessity*. Femininity is boring and apolitical. Masculinity is exciting, global, and political. As a result, only masculine fiction writing could effectively grapple with weighty subject matter like mutinies of working-class sailors and conspiracies of the racially marginalized—and, presumably, express relief about how they are put down in the end or nod at a warning about exactly what disasters might befall if they aren't.

Lord considers himself an "iconoclast" where Austen is concerned: "I should not be surprised to find myself acclaimed as the Devil's Advocate," he concludes. Of course, we now know that he was declared precisely that at the Sette's Night of the Divine Jane. Rhetorically, Lord still seems to imagine himself in the periodical essay as speaking to the same audience he addressed at the Sette of Odd Volumes. It does make one wonder just how many Austen essays published in leading periodicals had their origins in private men's clubs. (If this were a common practice, it might explain in part why so much conversation on Austen in this period appears to us to be written in a man-to-man, urbane, and knowing argot.) Lord ends his 1902 depreciation with the ratifying point, as he characterizes it, that Austen herself described her work as "small" in her private correspondence. He must be on the mark about her shortcomings if the author agrees with him, he suggests. Lord discerns no humor or irony in any of Austen's correspondence with Royal Librarian James Stanier Clarke, instead seeing her as freely admitting her "essentially feminine" smallness, to which Lord is only too happy to accede ("Jane" 674).

If we read Lord's published essay alongside Hassall's image on the 1902 dinner menu, the Sette of Odd Volumes night looks quite different. The talk sought to crush—and the menu illustration to accompany and make fun of

those who would crush—men's club Janeites. Lord envisions himself as performing a political public service, a needed literary execution. Illustrator Hassall set out to poke fun at Lord and Janeites all at once. His image was created as a private in-joke among club men, viewed by very few eyes in the years since its publication. Lord's essay, however, ended up, five months later, in the hands of tens of thousands, in a leading periodical.[36]

The *Nineteenth Century and After* was a nonsectarian, high-circulation, and well-regarded monthly, featuring work by leading writers and intellectuals. At its helm was noted editor-publisher and architect Sir James Knowles, who also just happened to be Walter Frewen Lord's father-in-law.[37] Yet even that cozy connection did not prevent Lord from coming under subsequent attack in the periodical's pages. Instead of inflaming the ire of the men's club literati, as Lord anticipated, his essay called out a far different opponent: a feminist Janeite. The writer who responded most directly to Lord's Austen essay signed herself, "Miss Annie Gladstone." Her response appeared in the *Nineteenth Century and After* several months after his, titled, "Another View of Jane Austen's Novels."[38] It was widely reprinted in periodicals in the United States and United Kingdom, attracting still further commentary.

Why editor Knowles would have chosen to publish a cutting rejoinder to his son-in-law's Austen essay may seem puzzling. It may simply have been a choice made to sell more copies of the magazine. It may also have been because the journal's reputation for nonpartisanship would be upheld by publishing a riposte to a controversial piece by the editor's son-in-law. Perhaps it was even a result of Knowles and his son-in-law Lord not getting on very well (Metcalf 343). Whatever the reason, the dueling essays provide us with a rare moment in which the men's club and first-wave feminist Janeites exchanged direct fire over how to classify the political meanings of Austen's image and fiction at a crucial time in the reformation of her political legacy.

Annie Gladstone rails against those who would use "feminine" as an insult. She weighs in on the Janeite and anti-Janeite wars: Austen "has been placed by the enthusiastic votaries on the very pinnacle of literary achievement; she has been accused by equally fervent detractors of being commonplace, monotonous, and, worst of all, feminine!" It's the last insult—feminine—that leads Gladstone to take Lord apart with force. She turns his argument on its head: "To say that Miss Austen's work is feminine is indeed its highest praise." She suggests that expecting Austen to write in a manly way is to seek inauthenticity. Gladstone criticizes Lord for suggesting "a woman should . . . avoid being feminine . . . [that] her work is only

valuable as it apes the characteristics of a man's mind" (113). Genius may be masculine or feminine.

A later review of Lord's 1906 book laid this bare as a distinctly political problem: "Mr. Frewen Lord appears to have waded through a vast quantity of novels seeking not literary merit but the political or moral lesson they conveyed."[39] It's amusing, because this is exactly the sort of criticism later made of feminist literary critics of the late twentieth century. Lord himself makes clear his own views on the early twentieth-century's women's movement: "Forty years of the Women's Movement—which was to do so much for us—has wrought little but mischief" (*Mirror* xiv). Gladstone, in her trailblazing 1903 response on Austen, focuses on Lord's faulty, gendered litmus test for testing Austen's artistic merit. He misjudges her achievement by measuring her fiction for a demonstrated interest in (masculine) government or statecraft, for worldliness and cosmopolitanism.

Gladstone takes Lord to task for finding Austen's fictional world small and for criticizing her lack of travel. Wordsworth and Shakespeare wrote of children and women, she points out. Shakespeare wrote a whole play about "the doings of a girl of fourteen who had probably never been out of her native Verona." "Why, pray," Gladstone asks, "is a girl of seventeen who has never been outside her own village less interesting than any other theme?" The problem, she argues, is in the beholder's eye: "We must not forget that when the subject is not interesting to us we are really expressing not the defect of that subject, but our own limitations. We mean that we have little knowledge of it and less sympathy" (Gladstone 115). Gladstone maintains that Lord is the one hampered with limitations, not Jane Austen.[40]

It's a decisive intervention in a conversation that usually excluded feminists, yet Austen critics have had trouble identifying her. Southam refers to her as "a Miss Gladstone" (2:73), indicating his uncertainty.[41] She was, in fact, Annie Martha (Gladstone) Wilton (1857–1932), a passionate educator of girls. She may have had reason to conceive of Austen as a precursor or a role model. At the time she published her Austen essay, Gladstone was a single woman, a teacher, and a pseudonymous writer in her early forties. The daughter of a bank clerk, Gladstone still lived with her parents and several talented siblings, all of whom had benefited from the systemic educational changes of their lifetimes. Gladstone ran a small secondary day school for girls in a London suburb.[42]

Her Austen essay appears to be the first she published using her own name as a byline, departing from her previous practice, an interesting choice for

an essay defending an author who, a century before, did not use hers.[43] In later years, Gladstone would break away even further from Austen's example. Her young first cousin, the gifted mathematician John Raymond Wilton, came to England from his native Australia. Together, Gladstone and Wilton would read aloud, with literature providing them an "ever-developing intimate bond."[44] When Wilton proposed to Gladstone on her birthday in 1908, it is said that she was surprised by it. Gladstone was fifty; Wilton was twenty-four (Stevenson 83). She told him to wait two years to see whether he felt the same. The two would marry in 1910 and move to Australia, where she published editorials under her married name.[45] I provide these details here not only because they are interesting but because it helps us to rethink our stereotypes of middle-aged spinster writers. Gladstone-Wilton doesn't seem to have published further work on Austen, but she deserves a more prominent place in our histories of Austen's reception for the one essay alone.

Gladstone's rejoinder anticipates not only the suffrage movement's later claiming of Austen for their cause (as we'll see in chapter 9) but the decades-later, far better-known, and oft-cited arguments on Austen by 1920s and 1930s feminist critics Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West.[46] History (and literary history) would prove to be more solidly on Gladstone's side than on Lord's where Austen and politics were concerned. At the time, however, opinion was far more divided. One source deemed Lord's essay a "clever analysis," another a "clever criticism."[47] But those who commented at greatest length supported Gladstone. Lord's "depreciating," "patronizing articles," while not seen as "really severe or ill-natured" were nevertheless neither "very valuable or very true," according to one periodical reviewer.[48] Another critic called Gladstone's essay "the most interesting article" of the volume and notes that it is "an answer to the impertinences—to use the word in its correct sense—of the [man] who . . . wrote flippantly against Austen."[49]

Gladstone's Austen essay may have taken some of its inspiration from W. D. Howells's discussion of Austen in *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), as Southam has charged (2:73). But it's certainly not the case, as Southam further suggests, that Gladstone had nothing new to say about Austen. Gladstone's defense of Austen against political attacks goes far beyond anything Howells published. She employed more rhetorically pointed, indignant language, in an essay that was a direct shot at Lord, who was himself admittedly responding to some extent to Howells. Gladstone broke the chain of men's-club-responding-to-men's-club Janeites in a high-profile periodical. Whether it

worked or not, she forced the conversation out of its single-sex rhetorical confines.

There's at least one way, however, in which Howells went further than Gladstone in his discussion of Austen's politics. Howells directly identified Austen's fiction as liberal or progressive, although labeling her *unconsciously* political. Of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet and her interactions with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Howells writes that Elizabeth's "triumph is something more than personal: it is a protest, it is an insurrection, though probably the discreet, the amiable author would have been the last to recognize or acknowledge the fact."[50] Howells as much as calls Elizabeth (and, by extension, Austen) a feminist revolutionary, "whether she knew it or not," because she "was in her way asserting the Rights of Man as unmistakably as the French revolutionists whose volcanic activity was of about the same compass of time as her literary industry" (49). It is hard to know whether Annie Gladstone would have agreed with this assessment of a progressive political Austen. (Austen's first dramatic adapters certainly seemed to.) Gladstone lived her life in sympathy with those who saw the potential for triumph in protest and insurrection among the less privileged, rather than, like Lord, seeing it as a form of wrongheaded revolt (mutiny, conspiracy) that great political literature ought to serve to put down.

We might say that W. D. Howells served as an ideological bridge between the men's club Janeites, many of whom saw Austen as safely apolitical, and feminists, who were unabashed about using Austen in support of progressive causes. The origins of these divergent opinions date back even further, as we saw in the introduction to this section, in the discussion of Austen in the House of Commons. There were also differences of political opinion about Austen among literary women. In her work on Victorian women's periodicals and Austen from the 1870s to the 1890s, Marina Cano-López notes that "Austen emerges as one of the fields where battles over female identity—liberal and conservative, professional and domestic—were fought."[51] As Victorian women's periodicals, and women themselves, debated women's proper rights and roles, Austen's fiction became a political field to mine, as well as a political minefield. Twenty years and more later, in the early 1900s, these conflicts had not been resolved. Sixty and more years later, by the 1940s, rousing debates over Austen's politics had faded from historical memory, along with the amateur dramatization craze and the memory of most of Austen's illustrations, save Thomson's and the Brocks'.

In the early 1900s, however, Howells and Gladstone were advocating for Austen against the dominant political positions of conservative elite clubmen. These men—speaking with the authority of their positions, and often speaking among themselves—were working to paint Austen into a very cramped literary corner. They were putting her on a pedestal, or, we might say, on a plinth. The likes of Walter Frewen Lord and G. K. Chesterton shaped the conversation about Austen as harmless and apolitical from their own powerful perches, inviting readers to weigh in on how to value Austen's conservatism, rather than asking whether she was conservative. They set the terms of the debate in the day's most respected cultural venues, but they could not dominate it. Their attempts to limit its terms prompted others to seek to widen them.

Today, when we repeat the early arguments about Austen made by conservative men, positioning the likes of West and Woolf as precocious feminist outsiders, we're misrepresenting the past. We're missing opportunities to record a wider range of statements. We're also missing the chance to understand how Austen became a political touchstone in an era of thundering debate, especially on gender politics. Those debates swirled vigorously around Austen, who, although long dead, was certainly a party to them. Her novel *Northanger Abbey* records a humorous conversation in which it's called an easy step from politics to silence.[52] But in the first century of Austen's afterlife, the easy step was more often from her supposedly apolitical novels to loud political debate.