The Making of Jane Austen

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JANE AUSTEN, SCHOOLED

ONE LOOSE-LEAF PHOTOGRAVURE IMAGE was chosen to represent Jane Austen to curious readers in the June 1915 issue of the educational periodical, the *Mentor*. It was Hugh Thomson's illustration "Mr Darcy and Sir William Lucas" from *Pride and Prejudice*. This must have been a deliberate selection. The *Mentor* liked to feature author portraits, too. It used a small reproduction of what then passed for Austen's face in the pages of the journal itself. But when it came to choosing the suitable-for-framing, large-format image to represent Austen in the *Mentor*'s pages, Thomson's illustration won out over the imaginary portrait. That choice communicates a few things. First, it speaks to how thoroughly Hugh Thomson had come to stand in for Austenian authenticity, twenty years after his Austen-inspired illustrations were first published.[1] But the framable image also suggests the kinds of themes and ideals that the *Mentor* set out to promote to its reader-learners. Thomson's Austen image is of a social scene. It depicts six people, highlighting two men. One looks like a toady and the other a snob. The question is, what lesson was this image supposed to be teaching?

Thomson's Sir William bends forward, his hands clasped together in an obsequious pose. Next to him stands Mr. Darcy, one foot artfully set out before the other. The hero scrutinizes Sir William with an upturned chin, through an artfully held monocle. There is something both funny and sinister about the illustration. It may have been a difficult scene for a reader new to Austen to interpret. The full-page explanatory text on the reverse side of the illustration wrongly describes the picture as "a graceful social scene," which doesn't exactly inspire confidence in the caption writer. In fact, Thomson's illustration depicts one of the novel's *least* graceful moments, when Sir William Lucas awkwardly attempts to flatter Darcy and Elizabeth

Bennet into dancing together. The *Mentor*'s choice of image is a meaningful visual alternative in an era that was also promoting Austen and Elizabeth Bennet as feminist role models. We might even see it as a response to that phenomenon, especially since this reproduction was designed not only for framing and appreciating as a work of art but was being sold as a teaching tool. Teaching Jane Austen in 1915, the *Mentor*'s illustrated plate seems to suggest, means emphasizing social graces and examining how men support, flank, and enable women in social situations. Its emphasis differs from what readers, viewers, and audiences were getting in other repackagings of Austen in the era's dramatic adaptations and some political speech.

The *Mentor*, with a circulation of more than fifty thousand, was an early twentieth-century magazine of the New York–based Mentor Association. The magazine and the association used as its slogans "Learn One Thing Every Day" and "Make the Spare Moment Count."[2] Touting its benefits and its smorgasbord curriculum to reading groups, the *Mentor* claims to be "instructive" for "those who want to gain knowledge by an easy and agreeable method." Each issue, a dozen or so pages long, had its own theme, ranging from Napoleon, to sporting vacations, to angels in art. The *Mentor* also features loose printed plates with each issue, and British authors had a fair amount of play in the contents. Shakespeare and Dickens were each subjects of an early issue. Although Jane Austen did not get her own issue—nor did any one woman—the first June 1915 number was devoted to famous women writers of England. Austen is presented as the most important member of that celebrated group.[3] Edgeworth is described as being before her, showing that Austen wasn't the first, but Eliot, Brontë, Gaskell, Barrett Browning, and Ingelow take a back seat to her in the *Mentor*'s account of prominence and famousness, as well as in chronology.

The *Mentor*'s Department of Literature Austen expert—the one who wrote its contents for the issue—was Hamilton Wright Mabie (1846–1916). Mabie was a prolific critic, editor, and magazine writer, then at the end of his career. In his essay, he rehashes old saws that were becoming standard fare about Austen in reference works, textbooks, and schools—her country village upbringing, her producing timeless fiction, her modest two inches of ivory statement, Scott's big bow-wow strain response to her, and so on.[4] Mabie presents Austen to reader-students as talented, narrow, quiet, and humble. He makes a few downright errors, but he also takes great pains to sell Austen without reservation to those unfamiliar with her.[5] He emphasizes

her quality and her popularity. Mabie's Austen is a novelist of "intrinsic interest," read by "a host of people" (3).

The *Mentor* describes Austen on the back page of the loose-leaf Thomson image (in text that may or may not have been authored by Mabie) as "charming and lovable," "shy and often very grave," despite having seen "a great deal of society," in what seems a mishmash of then-circulating stereotypes—the delightful Aunt Jane mixed with the pious old maid.[6] When mentioning her never having married, the *Mentor* makes sure to indicate that she had options. Her life's "one romantic story of a love who died is veiled in mystery," as it cryptically notes. In the last paragraph, the *Mentor* paraphrases the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (unattributed) on the subject of why readers should tackle Austen: "It was not until quite recent times that to read [Jane Austen] became a necessity of culture. But she is now firmly established as an English classic." Seven great men who admired Austen are listed—Coleridge, Tennyson, Macaulay, Scott, Sydney Smith, Disraeli, and Archbishop Whately—to reach the oft-repeated conclusion that "she was always admired by the best intellects" and that "Disraeli read 'Pride and Prejudice' seventeen times" (n.p.).

The history of Jane Austen in schools—even of Jane Austen in encyclopedias, as we see here—is rife with the endorsements of Great Men. It would seem that to know *who* loved Austen was to know *how* to love her. Jane Austen became a "necessity of culture" not only on her own merits but because Macaulay believed her to be a rival to Shakespeare or because Scott was envious of her talents. Austen was taught to schoolchildren as a great author whose greatness was time tested because Great Figures said she was great. It wasn't as if such statements were absent from other kinds of printed materials about Austen. These endorsements appeared in many other venues. What's unusual is how central and how oft-repeated they were in educational materials about Austen. The Great Men endorsing the Great Austen had become a common schoolbook (and reference book) refrain. That, too, shaped her image profoundly.

Not everyone was happy about Austen's fiction being turned into schoolroom fodder. As one writer put it in 1917, Austen's "most delightful book [*Pride and Prejudice*] has been most unsuitably made into a schoolbook in the twentieth century."[7] Yet, in fact, Austen's novels had been made into school texts well before they were made into scholarly ones. As we'll see in chapter 11, Austen's novels appear on recommended reading lists for schools as early as 1838. The reason she became the subject of the first "dissertation,"

as we'll see in chapter 10, is because a Harvard professor was teaching Austen's writings to his male students in the 1880s. Austen arguably came more forcefully into classrooms and curricula of many kinds before she became an object of extended literary scrutiny and historical study. Even that milestone moment in the history of Austen's scholarly profile, the publication of what would become the standard edition of Austen's novels, edited by R. W. Chapman in 1923, might be said to have grown out of the schoolroom phenomenon.[8]

To some degree, however, making sense of Austen's position in English-language schools provides us with a chicken and egg question. What came first, we might ask, the growth in popularity of Jane Austen or the growth of English literature instruction in schools of all kinds? Austen's rise to celebrity coincided with great changes in the position of literary texts at all levels of the curriculum. She and her works benefited from the humanities becoming less focused on classical texts and more anchored in English literature over the course of the nineteenth century. The appeal of Austen's fiction as a subject for children also happened in sync with profound changes in educational institutions, particularly the rise of women's education in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some sought greater opportunities for female learning in formal settings, while others wanted to stop it in its tracks. As arguments over "the woman question" took new turns, women writers' stature in schools took on new importance and visibility. Austen's somewhat mysterious and malleable life story, and the wide appeal of her writings, put her in the right place at the right time for both escalating fame and wider school exposure.

We can't claim that Austen came early or late to the classroom in comparison with her literary peers. Because there was no standard practice for the formal teaching of novels in her lifetime, all novelists of the early nineteenth century in effect "came late" to textbooks and schoolrooms. Novels were long considered low trash or light entertainment, not educational tools, meaning that fiction of the Romantic period emerged in educational settings decades after its first publication, introduced as de facto passé. We'll see in chapter 11 how Austen fared when literary instruction expanded to include novels and when educational opportunities expanded for girls and women. By the early twentieth century, Austen was being put before tens of thousands of young people, many of them at ages that mirrored those of her heroes and heroines—in their teens. She was imagined as both a good literary and moral influence on the young. Few suggested that her fiction

was interested in youthful rebellion or social change. In textbooks, her humor was lightened. Her satire was downplayed. It was a thrust that led to Thomson's images of Austen being perfectly suited to the period's educational texts.

The story of Austen's reputation as it was established, grew, and was debated in schools, universities, and author societies cannot be described in a straightforward line or an overarching sound bite. Once the question was no longer *whether* to teach Jane Austen in schools, it became *how*—in excerpts, abridgments, whole works, or, later, adaptations. Most authors of extended-length works faced similar questions, as educators tried to figure out how much and what literature to assign to their students. *Why* Austen should be read was similarly debated. Should the focus should be on understanding her in her own time or on translating her to the present? Should she be taught for manners, morals, or patriotic feeling?

In the early years of her fame, Jane Austen was presented at her most moralizing, straitlaced, and serious in literary instruction in schools. Textbooks and essays designed for teachers described Austen as the kind of woman that a student should want to become. Rarely presenting her as a demure rebel, they peddled Austen's characters as models of polite elegance. They suggested that reading and appreciating her fiction was a sign of taste and accomplishment. Many textbooks show an investment in advancing ideas of her literary quality, proper morality, and cultural safety. It was an approach that would last. For a few pioneering educators of the mid-twentieth century, even Austen's works adapted to film were perceived as a cultural good for instructing the young. In the following two chapters, we'll see the trailblazing individuals who had an impact, and specific trends that made a difference, in the history of Jane Austen education.

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