The Making of Jane Austen

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JANE AUSTEN, POLITICIZED

ON MAY 1, 1872, the House of Commons was debating an oddly named and controversial piece of legislation: the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill. It would seem a difficult thing for a politician to come out against, the removing of women's disabilities. Who could be for keeping disabilities in place? The bill had been cleverly named. It proposed to expand the franchise, giving women property owners (e.g., the unmarried and widowed) the right to vote.[1] With a petition in favor of the bill having reached almost a quarter of a million signatures, wide public support was claimed. The proposed legislation had supporters in both houses, among both Tories and Liberals, but it also had strong opponents in each. On that day in May, members of Parliament engaged in heated debate, touching on such questions as whether women were more illogical—or had better control of their passions, or greater sobriety—than men. In making their arguments for and against the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill, the politicians also repeatedly name-checked Jane Austen.

Austen's name was first mentioned on that day in 1872 by Conservative MP John Henry Scourfield (1808–76), of Pembrokeshire, Wales. A published account gives us a sense of what he had to say. He believes "the incomparable Jane Austen" would have been staunchly against the bill and against women voting at all, just as he believes the majority of British women then were.[2] Scourfield uses a quotation from one of Austen's novels to support his claim: "Goldsmith tells us when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, death is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill-fame" (38). Scourfield doesn't say where this line appears in Austen, but it's from *Emma*. It's used by the narrator to describe Highbury's response to the death of the much-maligned

Mrs. Churchill, the wealthy, controlling aunt and guardian of Frank Churchill. The quotation continues, "Mrs. Churchill, after being disliked at least twenty-five years, was now spoken of with compassionate allowances." This seems a satire on the population of Highbury, not a seriously communicated universal truth. As a result, it's hard to recognize in this line what Scourfield wants it to mean—that Austen was skeptical of women's wisdom. It's even more difficult to imagine it as suggesting that women's disagreeableness or ill-fame ought to disqualify the entire sex from voting. Yet that's precisely how Scourfield would have us interpret it, and he expected to carry the day.

Once Jane Austen's would-be opposition to the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill had been alleged, another MP set out to claim, on the contrary, that Austen would have been a solid supporter of the bill. Those trying to defeat it said that it was only women who were "failures in life," those who were not wives, who sought the franchise. In response, John Francis Maguire, Liberal MP for Cork, takes issue with the idea that "Miss Austen was opposed to the idea of such a concession," that "failures in life" shouldn't get the vote. Maguire points out that the alleged female "failures" have "awfully increased of late, for they may be reckoned by tens of thousands." Moreover, he argues, "Among those failures who are bent on obtaining this right for their sex are many of our deepest thinkers and our most brilliant writers." It leads him to refer to Jane Austen once again: "As to Miss Austen, she wrote good works some half-century since; but if that lady were now alive, would she not be found with the women of this day who are her equals, if not her superiors, in intellect and in cultivation?" (*Hansard* 45).

Could this be the earliest argument over Jane Austen in a legislative body?

There's one more wrinkle worth mentioning. Referring to Austen in parliamentary debate was no innocent act on that day. Just after Maguire spoke, claiming that Austen would have been in favor of so-called failed women getting the vote, the MP for Sandwich was roused to respond. Edward Hugessen (E. H.) Knatchbull-Hugessen makes it clear that *he* is voting against the bill. He argues at length against Maguire and the bill, concluding, "I am against 'woman's rights' because I wish to retain women's privileges" (*Hansard* 54). Knatchbull-Hugessen doesn't refer to Jane Austen directly in his remarks, but perhaps it's because he doesn't need to. Many would have known that Knatchbull-Hugessen was there speaking *as an*

Austen. He was the author's great-nephew, the man who would later become Edward, Lord Brabourne, first editor of Austen's *Letters* (1884).

Parliamentary debates using Austen were the most prominent places to demonstrate her growing political legacy. Between the 1870s and the 1920s, there was such frequent mention of Austen in political argument and public speech that one critic expressed his exasperation with it. As G. K. Chesterton puts it in his 1929 essay, "There was a remark about Jane Austen in connexion with the General Election. We have most of us seen a good many remarks about Jane Austen in connexion with the Flapper or the New Woman or the Modern View of Marriage, or some of those funny things. And those happy few of us who happen to have read Jane Austen have generally come to the conclusion that those who refer to her have not read her."[3] Chesterton's essay takes issue with the journalist who'd used *Pride and Prejudice*'s charismatic villain, George Wickham, to make a political point. The journalist is said to have claimed that women who were part of the "Flapper vote" would have been able to see through a charlatan like Wickham in five minutes. Chesterton disagrees. He argues that Wickham is exactly the kind of man who might "make a success of political elections" in their own day, who was "made for Parliamentary life." Chesterton concludes, "So vividly do I see Mr. Wickham as a politician that I feel inclined to rewrite the whole of *Pride and Prejudice* to suit the politics of today."

Making his own capsule political novel out of Austen's characters, Chesterton would send Elizabeth and Jane Bennet out to canvass. Elizabeth would go "with amusement" and Jane "with dignified reluctance." For Lydia Bennet, Chesterton expresses the highest of hopes: "She would be a great success in modern politics," he declares (200). But it's Wickham's triumph over Darcy that brings Chesterton the most amusement in crafting his cynical work of speculative fiction. Chesterton, a conservative, shows utter disdain for the politicians of his own day, while reinforcing Austen's importance to contemporary understandings of them. George Wickham, Chesterton argues, "would be the greatest success of all" as a politician: "He might become a Cabinet Minister while poor Darcy was sulking in the provinces, a decent, truthful, honourable Diehard, cursing the taxes and swearing the country was going to the dogs—and especially to the puppies" (200). In Chesterton's worldview, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* serves as the foundational text among a Conservative's tragic political fables.

Austen's legacy in politics—on podiums, signage, and soapboxes—has a far deeper and richer history than most of us realize. We can't say that

Austen came late to being referenced in political speech. It's not because it's untrue but rather because there's little basis for judgment. One might assume that, because she was so often said to be an apolitical novelist, she was also slower to be brought into political conversations. In fact, the opposite argument holds up to scrutiny. Austen was labeled apolitical in highly politicized ways. Her fiction was quoted by politicians and political activists, becoming a touchstone in institutions of the modern state. And for more than a century and a half, those who became invested in a political Austen (whether they called her that or not) have clashed.

Among the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite male literati, many of whom were socially if not politically conservative, Austen tended to represent a lost golden age for courtship and marriage.[4] She was envisioned as a cultural emissary from once-smooth domestic waters, to which some hoped society might yet return. For feminist activists and suffragists of the time, however, Austen was a foremother—a foregrandmother—whose very existence and achievements proved the rightness of their cause for expanding women's rights and opportunities. In chapter 8, I turn to one of their more prominent clashes. In 1902–3, a private men's club speech about Austen spilled over from a jovial dinner onto the public page. The men's club author pitched his remarks to others of his group and kind. The most prominent public response, however, came from a feminist woman, starting a print controversy. In chapter 9, I look at the direct ways that the women's suffrage movement used Austen's name and image in propaganda plays, street activism, and costume parties. Dressing up *as* Jane Austen for women's rights turns out to be one of the earliest forms of Janeite cosplay. I look at how establishment figures, peaceful activists, and radical protesters brought Austen into their lives and writings. They used her to wildly different ends—all claiming her allegiance to their causes—to ratify their most deeply held political passions. At signal moments of political debate in the past, especially debates over gender roles, it sometimes seems as if everyone wanted to claim Austen for his or her side.

Now we've again become used to talking about Jane Austen and politics in the same breath. Twitter death threats over Jane Austen's being put on the ten-pound note are merely the most sensational of such conversations. Hollywood stars now claim Austen for feminism. Scholars and students regularly engage in readings of her fiction using political theories, whether Marxist, feminist, queer, or postcolonial.[5] We've even become more accustomed to the idea that Austen was taken up by politicians and for political

purposes in the past. Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Janeites" (1924) has enjoyed renewed popularity.[6] It considers the officers, soldiers, and nurses of World War I as devotees of Austen, exploring how they used her fictional characters to make sense of human follies and tragedies in the trenches. The fact that Winston Churchill read Austen as an escape from worry and illness during World War II is now frequently cited.[7] It turns out that Jane Austen—an author for so long described as having nothing to do with war and politics—definitely got around in wartime, as many now realize. But she was debated and got around politically beyond those signal moments, too.

That's why it's so surprising that, by the time of the bicentenary of Austen's birth in 1975, there was scant cultural memory of her onetime centrality to heated polemical or meaningful political thought, war related or not. Once again, if Austen were imagined as having a politics at all, she was believed to be conservative, due to her fiction's seeming endorsement of traditional marriage. It took years to change those widely held conceptions, too. It's one reason why understanding Austen's repoliticization in our own time as the doyenne of girl-power feminism requires our resituating her among more distant debates. To tell the story of Jane Austen in politics means providing a history of the intense conflicts over her, in clubs of all kinds, and in activism and political protest, as well as in establishment print commentary, oral speech, and political cartoons. Whatever party Austen may or may not have affiliated with during life, her legacy puts her all over the political map. If history is any guide, your sense of whether that would have pleased her or left her nonplussed may hew more closely to your own political beliefs than to anything we can prove about hers.

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