

Jane Austen's London

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Abstract

Jane Austen depicted realistically the miniature world of countryside England: her novels' plots mainly develop in the provincial estates and country houses of the landed gentry. However, in her published works Austen focuses also on an unpredictable and chaotic London and establishes an opposition between life in the town and the more peaceful and valuable life in the countryside. The town is often mentioned in her novels and plays a central role in the formation and experiences of many characters. Austen's representation of the capital, her physical depiction and moral evaluation of it, shall be specifically confronted both with some of the period's historical reports and with the eighteenth-century writer's personal experience of it. According to her novels, London's positive aspects and sources of fascination are shops and theatres. On the other hand, the town is simultaneously presented as a dirty, chaotic and unhealthy milieu which can be a source of distraction from serious matters for its inhabitants and visitors by means of its numerous forms of entertainment. London can also corrupt the individual by relaxing his/her costumes and inducing him/her into many vices.

Keywords: Jane Austen, London, town, Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility.

1. The Country Village and the Town

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in her six novels Jane Austen reproduces mainly the small world of Southern England, portraying realistically many of its characteristic details, from the various societal habits of the landed gentry to the houses' decor and the surrounding countryside. Such a provincial world constitutes the basis of her completed works, the main setting for the development of her novels' plots, what Gillian Russell describes as "her exploration of the more 'quiet' sociability of the English provinces" (2011, 180).¹ It is a very marginal space, characterized by estates, parks and country houses, which coincides with a very precise geographical area of England that does not include the North and the areas most influenced by the industrial revolution, as Franco Moretti has noted (1997, 15-16). The heroines of Austen's novels reside inside of this area, usually moving from a close community living in a small and rural centre to the most open society in a major city such as Bath, Brighton or London.

Nevertheless, as Susan Morgan argues, Austen's fictional world is not as static as it could appear. Indeed, it is not an exclusively domestic universe; rather, Austen presents a mobile and itinerant picture in which her heroines remain rarely in the "country village". The examples are

numerous, from *Northanger Abbey* which “sports a heroine who is on the road for almost all of the novel” (Morgan 2000) to *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, all of which begin with a heroine who is “forced out of the familiar and into the greater world” (Morgan 2000) because of her family’s acute financial problems, and who often continues to travel afterwards. In *Pride and Prejudice*, instead, Elizabeth lives at Longbourn with her family for most of the narrative, but she undertakes two crucially significant journeys that facilitate the evolution of the plot and the development of the protagonist’s perception of the world (Morgan 2000). In the first journey, she discovers that Darcy’s disinterestedness is only apparent and that he is actually in love with her. During the second journey, after encountering Darcy in his own mansion at Pemberley, Elizabeth confides him the shameful truth of Lydia’s flight with Mr. Wickham, a problem Darcy himself shall solve. As Penny Gay notes, “one major component of the domestic lives Austen creates for her heroines is their lack of domesticity, their wandering feet, the way they are drawn outward [. . .] toward a beckoning larger social world” (2001, 56). These characters’ mobility thus reproduces the typical mobility of the time’s country gentry, but it also reflects Austen’s own (reluctant) social wanderings, from Steventon to Bath after her father retired, and then, after he died, her shifting from place to place with her mother, her sister Cassandra, and her friend Martha Lloyd before finally settling at Chawton.

London is frequently mentioned in Austen’s works. Austen herself repeatedly visited the city during her life, the first time with her parents in 1788 and then as a guest of her brother Henry and his wife Eliza (respectively in Cork Street, St. Michael’s Place, Sloane Street, Henrietta Street and Hans Place). In all of her novels, London is often referred to merely as “the town”. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, “Mr. Bingley was obliged to be in town the following day” (2013c, 8). In *Emma*, Mr. Weston is “so constantly occupied either in business in town” (2013a, 9). Similarly, in *Mansfield Park* Lady Bertram explains that she “gave up the house in town, which she had been used to occupy every spring, and remained wholly in the country” (2012a, 20). Possession of a house in London certified “the presence of great incomes, usually those belonging to the prosperous landed gentry”, as Edward Copeland has indicated (2011, 130). Such an income was more than 4000 pounds a year. It was a habit for the landed gentry of the period to spend part of the winter in the capital in order to experience “few weeks enjoyment of the great world” (2013b, 152), as Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliott affirm in *Persuasion*.

2. Shopping in the Capital

For Jane Austen’s heroines as well as for the women belonging to the period’s landed gentry the “enjoyment of the great world” consisted mainly of the activities of shopping and theatre-going. During the age of Regency shopping was indeed a typically feminine and fashionable occupation. Alison Adburgham argues that, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, “luxury [in London] fills every head with caprice [. . .] and shops become exhibitions of fashion. In the spring, when all persons of distinction are in Town, the usual employment of the ladies is to go a-shopping, as it is called” (1964, 74). Jane Austen herself visited frequently London’s shopping areas. She used to acquire many goods near Covent Garden and Leicester Square, especially at clothes shops such as *Layton & Shears* and *Grafton House*, as one of her letters testifies: “instead of saving my superfluous wealth for you to spend, I am going to treat myself with spending it myself. I hope at least that I shall find some poplin at Layton & Shears that will tempt me to buy it” (qtd. in Le Faye 1995, 152). In another letter, addressed to her sister Cassandra, she lists the

clothes she has acquired for her mother, Martha Lloyd and her other cousins: “I am sorry to tell you that I am getting very extravagant & spending all my Money; & what is worse for you, I have been spending yours too” (qtd. in Le Faye 1995, 120).

Austen’s personal habits are an epitome (and a consequence) of the commercial spirit of the capital and its wealth. As Robert Porter points out, in fact, since the beginning of the previous century and thanks to the numerous sailing ships anchored in the Thames, “London’s quays were herding a staggering 80% of the country’s imports [. . .] Everything came to London” (1996, 218-19). By the eighteenth century, London was not only the most populated city in England with almost a million of citizens but also the preeminent city in the whole western world (Russell 2011, 177) and “the centre of international trade and finance” (Ackroyd 2001, 573). The city’s shops were the most numerous and luxurious. Specifically, the finest and smartest streets where people used to stroll were: Bond Street, Piccadilly, the Mall, St James’s Palace and Oxford Street (Le Faye 2002, 69). Already in 1786, the latter was described by Sophie von la Roche – a German novelist who travelled extensively throughout Europe and published her travelogue *Sophie in London* - as “a street half an hour to cover from end to end, with double rows of brightly shining lamps [. . .] and the pavement, inlaid with flag-stones, can stand six people deep and allows one to gaze at the splendidly lit shop fronts in comfort” (qtd. in Adburgham 1964, 71). Von la Roche also affirms that the shops are structured and arranged so that

every article is made more attractive to the eye than in Paris or in any other town, [. . .] women’s materials [. . .] hang down in folds behind the fine high windows so that the effect of this or that material, as it would be in ordinary folds of a woman’s dress, can be studied. Amongst the muslins all colours are on view. (qtd. in Porter 1996, 144)

Shops were also the major sources of light in the main streets where the purchase of goods was practised: as a traveller noted in 1785, “not a corner of this prodigious city is unlighted ... but this innumerable multitude of lamps affords only a small quantity of light, compared to the shops” (qtd. in Ackroyd 2001, 442).

The feminine occupation of going “a-shopping” is reproduced very closely in Austen’s works. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrator specifies that “the first part of Mrs. Gardiner’s business on her arrival, was to distribute her presents and describe the newest fashions” (2013c, 135-36). Later in the novel, Kitty and Lydia are delighted to show their purchases to the rest of the family; the latter justifies the choice of a bonnet she has recently acquired by saying: “Oh! But there were two or three much uglier in the shop; and when I have bought some prettier-coloured satin to trim it with fresh, I think it will be very tolerable” (2013c, 212). The same fascination for London’s elegant boutiques is described in *Sense and Sensibility*, in which Edward affirms: “What magnificent orders would travel from this family to London, [. . .] in such an event! What a happy day for booksellers, music-sellers, and print-shops!” (2010, 90). The experience of going “a-shopping” is then presented in *Pride and Prejudice* as one of the main advantages of the life in an urban environment, although London is not favoured against life in the country. Indeed, Mrs. Bennet argues: “I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country, for my part, except the shops and the public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter” (2013c, 40).

3. Theatres

Another source of fascination for both Jane Austen and her characters were contemporary theatres. As Amanda Vickery states, in fact, “genteel Georgian women were indefatigable consumers of all kinds of public entertainment in London and the provinces” (qtd. in Russell 2011, 178). Austen herself “was extremely familiar with drama, players and theatre practices” (Harris 2011, 39) and she often visited Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Lyceum. At Drury Lane, she had the chance to watch the notorious actor Edmund Kean performing Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. Kean, who had debuted in London on March 1814 (Brockett 2002, 288; Harris 2011, 45), was by then, in Austen’s own words, “more admired than ever” (qtd. in Le Faye 1995, 164 and 166). Similarly, many of the characters of her novels enjoy going to the theatre in both London and the provinces: Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* likes the Little Theatre in Haymarket (2013c, 307), whereas Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* visits Drury Lane (2010, 171). The Bennett sisters describe their visit to the capital by narrating that “the day passed most pleasantly away: the morning in bustle and shopping, and the evening at one of the theatres” (2010, 148). In *Northanger Abbey*, “the Allens, Thorpes, and Morlands all met in the evening at the theatre” in Bath (2012b, 58).ⁱⁱ On another occasion, Catherine is worried to encounter the Tilneys (whom she thinks she has probably offended that same day), but she has no excuses to avoid her “societal duty” and therefore “to the theatre accordingly they all went” (2012b, 79). In *Persuasion*, Charlie is very proud to have anticipated his mother’s wishes by securing a box for the following night and says: “A’n’t I a good boy? I know you love a play, and there is room for us all. It holds nine. [. . .] We all like a play. Have not I done well, mother?” (2013b, 205)

4. Unhealthy Air

London is, however, not only praised for its good qualities and pictured in good terms by Austen. One of the negative aspects of the capital that emerges from her novels is the town’s dirt and unhealthy air. As Liza Picard points out, the town was in fact “notorious for its smutty and unhealthy air. Sea coal burnt ingrates, for the brewing, baking and boiling trades, in potters’ kilns and in dyers’ yards created an ‘impure and thick mist’ which left visitors choking and wheezing” (2000, 116-17). The cloud of black smoke hovering over London was mainly due to the accelerated urban industrialization experienced from the late eighteenth century onwards (Kasuga 2013, 14 and 52). Black smoke became a part of the negative iconography of the capital during the eighteenth century (Kasuga 2013, 129) and was mentioned by many literati and travellers. In 1748, for instance, the Swedish traveller Pehr Kalm recorded the view from St. Pauls with the following words: “the thick coal smoke, which on all sides hung over town, cut off the view in several places” (qtd. in Kasuga 2013, 98). In 1810, an American visitor affirmed: “the smoke of fossil coals forms an atmosphere, perceivable for many miles [. . .] This smoke forms a cloud which envelopes London like a mantle, a cloud which suffers the sun to break out only now and then” (qtd. in Simond 1968, 85-86). Such a depiction of London is indubitably very different from William Wordsworth’s eulogistic terms in “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”, in which he affirms that “Earth has not anything to show more fair” with the capital’s “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” lying “Open unto the fields, and to the sky”.

The air of the city is depicted literally as unhealthy by Austen as well. Many of her characters complain about the air pollution. Sir Lucas alludes to it in *Pride and Prejudice*: “I had once some thoughts of fixing in town myself [. . .] but I did not feel quite certain that the air of London would agree with Lady Lucas” (2013c, 23-24). In *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse addresses his

daughter Isabella on the subject: “Ah! My poor dear child, the truth is, that in London it is always a sickly season. [. . .] Nobody is healthy in London, nobody can be. It is a dreadful thing to have you forced to live there! So far off! – and the air so bad!” (2013a, 99). Isabella replies by evidencing her privileged residential position in the West End, whose difference from the Eastern part of the city she remarks:

No, indeed, *we* are not at all in a bad air. Our part of London is so very superior to most others. You must not confound us with London in general, my dear sir. The neighbourhood of Brunswick Square is very different from almost all the rest. We are so very airy! [. . .] we are so remarkably airy!” (2013a, 99-100).

Austen thus reproduces in her novels the social distinction between West and East London that was created after the Restoration when thousands of people moved to the residential district of the West End, which became the most elegant and fashionable area of London. The structure of the city at large was modified: London’s inhabitants experienced a new kind of social segregation in which the hierarchy determined by income was replicated in the topography of the city, as Peter Ackroyd argues (2001, 677). The American traveller Louis Simond notes such a geosocial classification by commenting:

the trade of London is carried on in the east part of the town, called, par excellence, ‘the City’. The west is inhabited by people of fashion or those who wish to appear such; and the line of demarcation, north and south, runs through Soho Square. To have a right to migrate from east to west, it is requisite to have at least £ 3000 sterling a-year. (1968, 31)

Ackroyd further specifies: “The inhabitants of St James’s, notwithstanding their life under the same laws and speak the same language, are a distinct people from those of Cheapside” (2001, 741-42).ⁱⁱⁱ

The topographical divide of London is represented also in *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the modest Gardiners reside in the East End (certainly the less refined area of the city then) whereas the well-to-do Darcy lives in the elegant West End. As Franco Moretti argues, the two families “live at the opposite poles of the city, they meet and like each other, they even become friends: but this occurs in Derbyshire countryside. In London, they never meet” (1997, 86). The very structure of the capital thus seems to prevent the encounter between different social classes, as Mrs. Gardiner herself states:

We live in so different a part of town, all our connections are so different, and, as you well know, we go out so little, that it is very improbable they should meet at all, unless he really comes to see her. And *that* is quite impossible [. . .] Mr. Darcy may perhaps have *heard* of such a place as Gracechurch Street, but he would hardly think a month’s ablution enough to cleanse him from its impurities were once to enter it” (2013c, 137).

By contrast, the countryside is praised for its healthy and pleasant environment, its fresh air and natural beauties. S.M. Abdul Kaleque evidences that “Fanny wants to go back to Mansfield Park in the hope of enjoying fresh air and other bounteous gifts of nature” (2005). In *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse insists on the difference between London and Hartfield by stating: “Ah! my dear, it is

not like Hartfield. You make the best of it – but after you have been a week at Hartfield, you are all of you different creatures; you do not look like the same” (2013a, 100). Later in the novel Emma praises the fact that “Surry is full of beauties” (2013a, 265). Her interlocutor Mrs. Elton affirms that “It is the garden of England” (2013a, 265), an affirmation partly contradicted by Emma herself, who believes instead that “many countries [. . .] are called the garden of England, as well as Surry” (2013a, 265).

The countryside is also set against the town as a morally healthier environment where solid values are cultivated. Indeed, as Melissa Burns argues, “Mansfield Park itself is shown to be a place of quiet contemplation, cleanliness, but also social order” (2005). Such an order is exemplified by Fanny, whose upstanding character, patience and moral superiority are opposed to the licentiousness of Maria and Julia Bertram. Nevertheless, as Kaleque notes, “Austen makes it clear that physical facilities become useless if moral values are not properly cultivated. [. . .] physical facilities will be charming only when there is a correspondence between outward beauty and the inner life” (2005).

5. A “Scene of Dissipation & Vice”

The bad reputation of the dirty and chaotic capital was exacerbated by the fact that London was also seen as the symbol (and possible cause) of a moral and metaphorical dirt. This was affirmed by Jane Austen herself, who wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1796: “here I am once more in this Scene of Dissipation & Vice, and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted” (qtd. in Le Faye 1995, 7). A reference to the wantonness of values in the capital is explicitly made in *Sense and Sensibility* when the character of Mr. Willoughby finally confesses - and attempts penitently to justify - his deceitful behaviour towards Marianne. He explains that Marianne’s note has awakened his remorse and attributes the distraction of his guilty conscience to live in the capital: “time and London, business and dissipation, had in some measure quieted it [my conscience], and I had been growing a fine hardened villain, fancying myself indifferent to her” (2010, 309). Willoughby’s experience of London is, therefore, all the more set against Marianne’s investment in London as a source of hope. Indeed, she decides to spend the social season in town with the express intention to meet Willoughby and openly cultivate her love for him. As the narrator reports,

Whenever they went, she [Marianne] was evidently always on the watch.

In Bond-street especially, where much of their business lay, her eyes were in

constant inquiry; and in whatever shop the party was engaged, her mind was

equally abstracted from everything actually before them, from all that interested

and occupied the others. Restless and dissatisfied every where her sister could

never obtain her opinion of any article of purchase. (2010, 155)

Later in the narrative, Marianne's disillusion is exacerbated by her being forced to stay in London for two months after she has discovered Willoughby's (profitable) engagement with Miss Grey. She comes to despise the town and longs for the countryside, which is connected in her thoughts to peace and freedom: "Marianne's impatience to be gone increased every day. She sighed for the air, the liberty, the quiet of the country; and fancied that if any place could give her ease, Barton must do it" (2010, 264).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the "town" is equally depicted as a milieu that can corrupt people's minds. Elizabeth, in fact, considers London as a source of distraction and one of the factors that could influence negatively the relationship between her sister Jane and Bingley. Indeed, "the united efforts of his two unfeeling sisters and of his overpowering friend, assisted by the attractions of Miss Darcy and the amusements of London, might be too much, she feared, for the strength of his [Bingley's] attachment" (2013c, 125). Certainly, the misconduct on the part of male characters such as Willoughby and Bingley is due to their inconsistency. However, it is inescapable to notice that their misbehaviour is associated to the metropolis. We can thus agree with Gillian Russell when arguing that "the salons of London are places where love dies" (2011, 181). Russell's affirmation could be applied also to the case of Lucy in *Sense and Sensibility*, who moves her affection from Edward to his younger brother after encountering – and dancing with – the latter in London. As Tony Tanner points out, in fact, "London, the world of liberty, amusement and fashion, has no redeeming qualities. [. . .] if Mansfield, at its best, perfects people, London, at its worst, perverts them" (2012, 479). This is epitomized by the behaviour of Maria, who leaves her husband Mr. Rushworth in utter disregard of her family's name and of her own honour. She destroys her character and reputation by having an illicit affair with Mr. Crawford. In *Mansfield Park*, London is considered as a source of both distraction and corruption. Fanny is happy to hear about the departure of her rejected pretender Mr. Crawford from Mansfield. The fact that he goes to "the town" is particularly significant for her because she is convinced that "London would soon bring its cure. In London, he would soon learn to wonder at his infatuation, and be thankful for the right reason in her, which had saved him from its evil consequences" (2012a, 320). London corrupts Tom Bertram as well: he ignores his father's recommendations and spends much of his time enjoying society and drinking, a vice which further compromises his health after the fall from a horse. On the other hand, the character of Jane considers London as a useful source of distraction that can help her to heal from the pain caused by her unreciprocated love for Bingley.

The association between London and corruption is established particularly through the depiction of the rich and materialistic Crawfords who, as Colleen A. Sheehan suggests, "are not only themselves corrupted, but they are bent upon dominating the wills and corrupting the souls of others". Mr. Rushworth does not have a good opinion of the Crawfords and plainly says that they "are no addition at all. We did very well without them" (2012a, 101). This very phrase seems to be realized later on, when Henry Crawford's departure from Mansfield becomes a relief for both Maria and Julia Bertram: "He was gone [. . .] gone from the house, and within two hours afterwards from the parish; and so ended all the hopes his selfish vanity had raised in Maria and

Julia Bertram” (2012a, 191). Mansfield Park is set against London as a more healthy environment for the minds of the Crawfords themselves: Mrs. Grant reprimands Mary Crawford when affirming that “You are as bad as your brother, Mary; but we will cure you both. Mansfield shall cure you both – and without any taking in. Stay with us and we will cure you” (2012a, 47). Later in the novel, this seems to be indirectly confirmed by Mary herself, who presents London as a social environment characterized by gossip and vain chatter: “you cannot have an idea of the *sensation* that you will be occasioning, of the curiosity there will be to see you, of the endless questions I shall have to answer” (2012a, 356).

Conclusion

Studies on Jane Austen’s depiction of life in the country abound, whereas very little critical attention has been paid towards the writer’s representation of the capital. Nevertheless, though discontinuously, the relevance of London in the life of the characters is asserted in all of Austen’s published novels. The capital offers a good lesson for many of her heroines: Marianne clashes against the sad truth in London; Jane becomes disenchanted in her love of Mr. Bingley; Fanny’s excellence and exemplary behaviour are set against the misbehaviour of the Crawfords (who come from London) and are further revealed after Tom’s and Maria’s misconduct in the town. The latter is therefore compared to the countryside, both in a favourable and a negative way. London’s commercial life, its shops and theatres are praised, whereas its unhealthy air and bad moral influence are profoundly criticized by Austen. Certainly, from such a picture rather emerges a preference for the life in the province, as the personal experience of Austen herself suggests. Although she constantly reminds us of London’s dangerous (immoral) influence and of the relaxation of costumes that it causes, the nineteenth-century writer also seems to suggest (whether through the direct experience of Marianne and Jane or through the reported tales of many characters) that to spend the winter season in the vibrant social life of the metropolis and to live and walk among its busy streets is a useful and formative experience.

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Endnotes

ⁱ According to Russell, sociability was based on the concentrated social interaction of a specific community characterized by intimacy and “an intensity to its significance as a melting pot for the British elite” (182). This is well epitomized in *Persuasion*, whose narrator specifies that “after the party has collected, all that remained was to marshal themselves, and proceed into the Court Room; and be of all the consequence in their power, draw as many eyes, excite as many whispers, and disturb as many people as they could” (170). In *Northanger Abbey*, the social habits of the characters are (ironically) defined as “regular duties” and are so enlisted: “shops were to be visited; some new part of the town to be looked at; and the Pump-room to be attended, where they paraded up and down for an hour, looking at everybody and speaking at no one” (15). Discourses are presented as frivolous and superficial: “in all probability not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before, under that roof, in every Bath season” (60).

ⁱⁱ As Gillian Russell has pointed out, Bath (in which Austen herself resided from 1801 to 1805) provides the example of another version of the “fashionable world” which is “a laboratory of Georgian sociability” (182).

ⁱⁱⁱ The contrary opinion was expressed later in the century by Charlotte Brontë, who affirmed: “I have seen the West End, the parks, the fine squares; but I love the City far better. The City seems so much more in earnest; its business, its rush, its roar, are such serious things, sights, sounds” (qtd. in Ackroyd 457).