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Jane Austen

(1775–1817)

I've always been amazed that, with all the detailed examination of Jane Austen in literary circles, I never hear remarked upon what I find the most remarkable aspect of her writing career: Jane Austen is the first great female author in our language. I am not saying that there were no other good women authors before she wrote, but Austen is indeed the first great female author. The few female authors before her have nowhere near the status that Jane Austen has acquired; she is a classic. We have to wonder then why there were great male authors from long before Chaucer, and yet we had to wait until almost 1800 before a great female author makes her appearance. Is the answer simply this: men by their very gender have always had an advantage in becoming great authors? This we know is not possibly true; if you have ever looked at any SAT scores, intelligence tests, or any other kinds of tests of native capabilities, you will discover that in general males score higher on science and math; females score higher on verbal and written skills. There are of course thousands of exceptions—many men are better at English than at math, many women are better at engineering than English. In general, however, females have always been more likely to become writers and authors by

their inherent skills than men have; yet there is virtually no female author of any great reputation before Jane Austen.

The primary reason women have not become authors is simply that men had absolute power in all things, and they certainly controlled the types of literature that were written. Men made certain that the very areas they considered literary were the very areas in which most women were ignorant. For example, the first great age of writing in most societies is the epic age. What is an epic about? An epic can encompass almost any aspect of human life, but the one constant in all epics is war, and of course the one area that women never had any firsthand experience in, until recently, is war. Since epics must cover war and women knew nothing about war, no epics were written by women as far as we know. The age that replaced the epic age, in England at any rate, is the Renaissance. One of the most popular types of poetry written in this period is love poetry, especially love sonnets. Now, with the introduction of the subject of love you would assume many women would try their hands at this genre. Yet how many great women authors wrote love poetry in the Renaissance? As far as we know, not one. Why? Of course love sonnets focus upon love, but since men controlled literature, they decreed that in love sonnets one had to praise one's mistress. Let's face it: unless a woman was singularly adventuresome during the Renaissance, she didn't have a mistress, and without a mistress she obviously couldn't write in praise of one.

Next comes the Restoration and the early eighteenth century. What three topics were considered (by men) to be obligatory? Politics, religion, and society—which topics excluded most areas with which women were familiar. In

fact, a woman could not be an author until recently. The original term for "writer" was not *author. Author* is what we've called such a person for quite some time, but it is really a shortened form. The word was not originally *author,* but *authority.* Women therefore could not be authors because they couldn't be authorities on anything except domestic issues, and until the novel genre really came about, domestic issues were of no importance to literature in general.

In fact, the whole act of writing was regarded as male. You can read in hundreds of sources from early days that when men discussed their writing, they talked about "fathering" a work of literature; you never heard of "giving birth" to a work of literature. Men went so far as to say that the very tool one used for writing, the pen, was a particularly male object and should not be used by females. If you look at a pen you notice that it is long and thin and pointed—I don't want to go into too much detail here, all of us are familiar with Freudian symbolism—but indeed you can see why men started to say that the pen was the ultimate phallic symbol and therefore women should have nothing to do with it. Indeed, why is a pen called a *pen*? *Pen* comes from the Latin word *penis,* which actually meant "tail," like a dog's tail. The very word we use for the writing tool is indisputably male.

You see, then, the entrenched tradition Jane Austen had to overcome. When Charles Dickens picked up his pen to write a novel, if he worried whether he could actually earn a living by writing, he could take security in a centuries-old tradition of men, a brotherhood, that stretched all the way back to Chaucer and beyond. Whom could Jane Austen look back to? Virtually no one—no female, no sister, had gone before to earn a living as an author.

Before we turn directly to Jane Austen's life, let us think about the fact that a writer has words and words alone as tools to build a work of art. If you're a painter, you have pigments; if you're a sculptor, you have clay; but if you're a writer, you just have words. And those words, in the English language, have tended to put women in their place; words by their nature are occasionally very antifemale, and Austen had to overcome this bias as well.

For example, if you have a little girl who acts more like a little boy than a little girl, we call her a tomboy. No girl has ever really minded being called a tomboy; it has no really negative connotation. However, if a little boy is acting like a little girl, we have a word for him too: *sissy*. Think of the difference in connotation between *sissy* and *tomboy: tomboy* has no negative connotation, *sissy* has no positive connotation. No little boy has ever wanted to be called a sissy, because men have always felt that the male is the superior sex and the female inferior. So when men regarded a little girl, considered inferior, behaving like a little boy, who was superior, they thought, now here's a spunky little girl. She's trying to act like a more important person; let's encourage her and call her a tomboy. But if they saw a little boy, the superior sex, trying to act like the inferior sex, well, they had to discourage him. They had to think up a negative name for the errant boy, and so they came up with *sissy*. *Sissy* is simply short for "sister," which tells you pretty much what men think about the concept of sisterhood. The opposite, though, brotherhood, is used as one of the founding symbols of America.

Notice the difference between male and female things and the connotations they have in our words. Now let's say

that little girl grows up and as a woman she's still not acting like a woman, she's acting like a man. If we look in the dictionary, what's the worst thing in the dictionary to describe a woman who acts like a man? Well, the worst thing we could call her that is not slang is *masculine*, and although no woman wants to be called masculine, it does have a rather positive connotation. You call a woman masculine and you at least mean she knows what she wants, she has a strong personality, she gets ahead, nothing stops her, so it's not a terribly negative term. But let's say that little boy grows up to be a man, and rather than acting like a man, he's acting like a woman. Do we have a word in the dictionary to call a man who acts like a woman? We do, we call him *effeminate*. That is the exact word we call him. And what does *effeminate* mean? It means acting like a woman and being disgusting. Now isn't it odd that there is no word in the dictionary that means acting like a man and being disgusting? We have no word on the other side of *effeminate*. We have to call a woman like that *masculine*, and yet we have the word that means acting like a woman and being disgusting. How come we don't have a word for acting like a man and being disgusting? Well, because men controlled the power and the power of words. They weren't going to invent a word that meant acting like a man and being disgusting because, since they were men, they figured, well, if you're acting like a man, it can't be all that disgusting no matter what sex you are.

Let us look at one final example of the very nature of the words that Jane Austen and other female authors had to surmount before we turn to her directly. You have all learned from earliest days in school that in English we have prefixes,

added to the beginnings of words, and suffixes, added to the ends of words. The most common suffix is *er.* If you end a verb in *er,* it always connotes a strong or violent action. That's why we call someone who labors a laborer, we call someone who murders a murderer, and we call someone who strangles a strangler—all strong actions. Now consider the much more sophisticated, accomplished suffix *ist.* If a noun ends in *ist*, it means having a particular talent or skill. We call a person skilled at working with teeth a dentist, we call a person who seeks perfection a perfectionist, and we call people who take up anthropology, anthropologists. It means having a particular talent or skill. Now given that *er* means taking a strong action and *ist* means having a talent or skill, we all know what we should call someone who rapes. We should call him a raper, meaning taking a strong action. However, because men controlled the language when a name was needed for this despicable man, they decided to call him a rapist, meaning possessing a particular talent or skill. It is one of the only examples in our language of a word that ends in *ist* that does not mean having a skill.

Now, having shown you how many obstacles Jane Austen faced as a female author, let me inspire you with how her unique genius would not be denied. Jane Austen's life does not seem the kind of life that would lead to such a revolutionary title as First Great Author in the English Language Who Was Not a Man. Her life can rather quickly be told. She was born in 1775 in the bucolic village of Stephenton, in the county of Hampshire, about an hour and a half west of London by car today, gorgeous rural country then as it is now. She was born into a secure world where every person knew his place. Her father was a rector in the Anglican

Church, so although he wasn't wealthy, his, and his family's, status was high. Because her father was a rector, we would place her in the upper middle class; because she lived in a rural setting, her class was the country gentry. In her novels *Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Sense and Sensibility*, she never writes about any other class at any length but the country gentry, which she knew so well. There were eight children in her family but only one other girl, a sister named Cassandra, with whom Austen was very close.

As a little girl Jane was shy and quiet around people her age and well behaved within her family. Her father and mother were bright, her brothers and sister extraordinarily bright; two of her brothers would go on to hold the two highest positions in the British navy. She lived amid a remarkable family that loved to be entertained by such exercises of the mind as conversation and reading aloud to one another. Jane took up writing at a young age to contribute to the family entertainment. At first she thought she would be a poet and write the first ever epic about a young woman. Any two lines from this early work would do to give you the flavor of her as a budding poet:

> She then left to go to dinner,
> after which she wasn't thinner.

Clearly poetry was not her calling, but Austen did not go directly to writing a novel. She had tried the epic form at fifteen; at sixteen she decided to write nonfiction prose, history in particular, and she decided to focus upon the history of England from the beginning of time. The result is a wonderful brief history of England; its chief glory was the title: "The

History of England by a Partial, Prejudiced and Ignorant Historian." (How many of us have read histories by ignorant historians? Austen is the only one forthright enough to publicly declare her ignorance.) I can't resist giving you just one typical selection, the segment she wrote about the reign of Henry VIII: "It would be an affront to my readers were I to suppose that they were not as well acquainted with the particulars of King Henry VIII's reign as I am, myself. Therefore, since it will be saving them the task of reading again what they have read before, and myself the task of writing what I do not perfectly recollect, I will give only the slightest sketch of this king's reign in the following two sentences." She does so and moves on. By the age of nineteen she decided to try writing a novel, and we are forever grateful she did.

She wrote her first novel at age twenty. She at first called it *Eleanor and Maryanne*, but eventually retitled it *Sense and Sensibility*. It was not, however, the sole focus of her writing. In her spare time she was writing another novel, which she decided to call *First Impressions*. That title didn't suit her, so she changed it to *Pride and Prejudice*. Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were finished by the time she was twenty-two years old. If any other author had died at twenty-two—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Byron—what would we have to read from them? Nothing. In her twenty-third year she wrote a work she called *Susan*, which became *Northanger Abbey*. By age twenty-three she has these three manuscripts—three of the six novels she wrote. Of course none of them were published; women didn't publish novels in that era, not only at her young age, but at any age. Her novels were written to entertain her brilliant family, and indeed they must have.

In 1800, when she was twenty-four, an event occurred that in terms of intensity was probably the climax of her emotional life. Her father announced one day at breakfast that taxes were so high and rectors paid so little—some things don't change in two hundred years—they could no longer afford to live as they desired in Stephenton, and he planned to move the entire family to the fashionable, thriving city of Bath. The minute Jane Austen heard her father announce his plan, she fainted dead away. Now why would she take it so terribly hard, this relocation to Bath? Because she knew the country-gentry set of this small town of Stephenton, she felt comfortable with it, she had her niche in society. She felt her father was wrenching her away from everything she knew and loved to go to a strange, anonymous city; it was a drastic transition for her.

The family did move to Bath, and almost immediately the future seemed to become more promising for Jane, because she received a proposal of marriage, from Harris Wither. We do not know much about Harris Wither, but fortunately a cousin of his wrote about him in a letter, trying to describe Wither to a friend: "He is a stutterer, he is huge, he is awkward, terribly flabby and above all unbelievably rude. These are his better qualities." Obviously, for Jane Austen he was no prize. In addition to his miserable personality, he was only twenty-one; she was twenty-seven. Do we have any glimpse of what she thought about him? As far as we can tell, the only emotion probably evoked from Jane Austen by Harris Wither was pity. It would seem to be a terrible match; it was not terrible at all, it was a most desirable match. Personality at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in Jane Austen's class, counted for naught. The two things that

mattered were the two things Wither had in abundance, land and money. Desirable as the match was, Jane Austen certainly did not have to say yes; she could have respectfully declined. But although the two had only known each other for a few days, when he proposed early one evening, she accepted.

When Jane Austen went to sleep that night, it was clearly the worst night of her life, because when she awoke the next morning, she did the unthinkable. She retracted her acceptance and told him no. British society dictated that one could either say yes or no, but one never said yes and then the next morning retract to say no. It must have been horribly difficult for Jane Austen to have to refuse Wither so immediately after accepting. Why change her mind? Her refusal had nothing to do, we feel, with any fears she may have felt that he would be a miserable companion. More to the point, she loved her family so much and found such delight and stimulation with them, that she was not going to give up such ideal society for Harris Wither.

Less than two years later, in 1805, Jane Austen's father died, a doubly traumatic event. She was of course close to her father, but if you have ever read her novels, you can imagine what would become of Jane, her mother, and her sister. Often when a father died, the women of the family got nothing; they became dependent either upon the sons or often upon a distant male cousin, who took control of the women's fates. So Jane, her mother, and Cassandra for the next four years were homeless. Of course they had a place to live—and it was not a shabby place—but it was not their own. They had to go from brother's house to brother's house or, in Mrs. Austen's case, from son's house to son's house,

depending on the mercy of their own kith and kin for a place to live. It clearly was unsatisfactory for all concerned.

I have now described the next ten years in Jane Austen's life, yet I have not told you one word about what she was writing, for good reason—she wasn't writing anything. This woman who produced three great novels by the time she was twenty-three wrote almost nothing for the next ten years. She had been so traumatized by the burdens of those ten years—the Bath experience, the proposal and her retraction, her father's death, and the resulting homelessness—that she was too emotionally unstable to write one decent word. In 1809 life blessedly changed. Jane's brother Edward had become exceptionally close to a childless couple, distant relatives. They were a wealthy landowning family, and when they died, they left the estate to him. Not only did the estate have a lovely manor house where Edward and his family would live, but also another charming house, called Chawton, just down the road. Edward made a gift of Chawton to his mother and his two sisters. Now Jane could move into her own home, and immediately she began to write, and to write quickly. The very year they moved in she completed her fourth novel, *Mansfield Park*, and during that year her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, was published.

The title page of this first published work of Austen's did not announce *"Sense and Sensibility*, by Jane Austen." Instead it read, *"Sense and Sensibility*, by a lady." But the very next year, because *Sense and Sensibility* did respectably, *Pride and Prejudice* was published. Probably one of the proudest moments of Jane Austen's life came when she was sent the title page of this novel, because the title page read, *"Pride and Prejudice*, by the author of *Sense and Sensibility."*

While these novels were being published, Austen was starting her next one, *Emma*, which many consider her masterpiece. It was finished in 1814, as *Mansfield Park* was being published. The next year she began *Persuasion* and published *Emma*. *Northanger Abbey* would not be published until after her death. Once Austen had found a stable home, she again began writing finely crafted novels at a remarkable rate. Yet even in the security of Chawton, writing was complicated. When Jane was at home with no one but her mother and sister, if anyone came into the room where she was writing, she would instantly put the manuscript away. Even in front of her family it would have been improper for it to seem she was writing anything of substance. Of course her family knew what a talented writer she was, and all of them were proud of her. But this was a great age of manners and decorum, so the appearances—even in the home—had to be kept up. When the Austen women moved into Chawton the door to their parlor had a squeak, which Jane refused to let anyone fix. If she was working on a novel and she heard the squeak of the door, she would know someone was coming in and thus she couldn't be caught, red-handed, being an author. She could quickly hide her writing in the desk and get out her knitting. And because she constantly had to put away her writing, she couldn't write on anything that looked like a manuscript: her work had to be written on scraps of paper so she could quickly throw them in a drawer. She would occasionally have to put the scraps in chronological order and simply feel the weight of them in her palm to realize how far she had gone and how far she probably had to go.

Despite these impediments she still wrote one glorious

novel after another. Unfortunately this prolific time was brief. When she had just finished *Persuasion*, at age thirty-nine, she developed what is today called Addison's disease, still a serious malfunction of the adrenal gland. She began her last novel, which she could not complete, called *Sanditon;* ironically, its setting is a health spa. Two months before her death she moved to the city of Winchester, seeking medical help. There was no help, and she died July 18, 1817, only forty-one years old.

At Winchester Cathedral, where she is buried, there is a lovely monument to Jane Austen. The inscription says all sorts of wonderful things about her, but not one word indicates she ever wrote anything. She is described as a fine Christian woman and daughter; there is no mention that she crafted some of the most enduring works in the English language.

Now then, what can we say about Jane Austen as a writer, other than that she is the first great *female* writer in English? Is there any literary technique she mastered better than anyone else—even Shakespeare? Yes. That technique is irony of a particular type: comic irony. Critics consider her the foremost comic ironist in the English language.

If you say, in certain situations, "It's ironic," you pretty much know what you're talking about, but irony is hard to define. Irony is the audience being *given* by the author what is other than, or opposite of, what was *expected*. For example, if I said to you, "The police station is unsafe," that is ironic. Why? Because you expect the police station to be safe.

The above example, however, is not great irony; if I wanted to turn the statement into great irony, it would not be difficult. Simple irony is "The police station is unsafe."

But great irony is "The police station was robbed." Why? Because irony is when you get *other* than what you expect; great irony is when you get the *opposite* of what you expect. Throughout Austen's novels she gives you comic irony unequaled by any other author. In fact, the most famous sentence she ever wrote is regarded as probably the most clever, ironic statement in any English novel. It is the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice:* "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

So, first, Jane Austen is the greatest comic ironist in the novel genre. What sounds more impressive but is not is the observation that she could write what we call "the perfect novel" better than any other author. What do I mean by "the perfect novel"? Jane Austen is one of those rare novelists in whom there is no progression of genius. She's perfect at the beginning and she's perfect at the end. What she cleverly did was focus upon the smallest segment of society, a milieu she knew extremely well: small, rural town, country gentry, and—above all—eligible young ladies in search of husbands. Plots revolve around meeting the wrong men, meeting the right men, and eventually, marrying and living happily ever after. It seems a narrow world, and it is, but because it is so narrow that it can probe deeply. In other words, though Austen's novels offer a narrow view of life, that view is perfect, there are no flaws. There is nothing she ever tackles that she does not do brilliantly.

And now we come to my third point, which lovers of Jane Austen will probably dismiss outright. No matter how beloved and respected an author is, that author will always have a weakness. Austen's weakness is this: she was unparal-

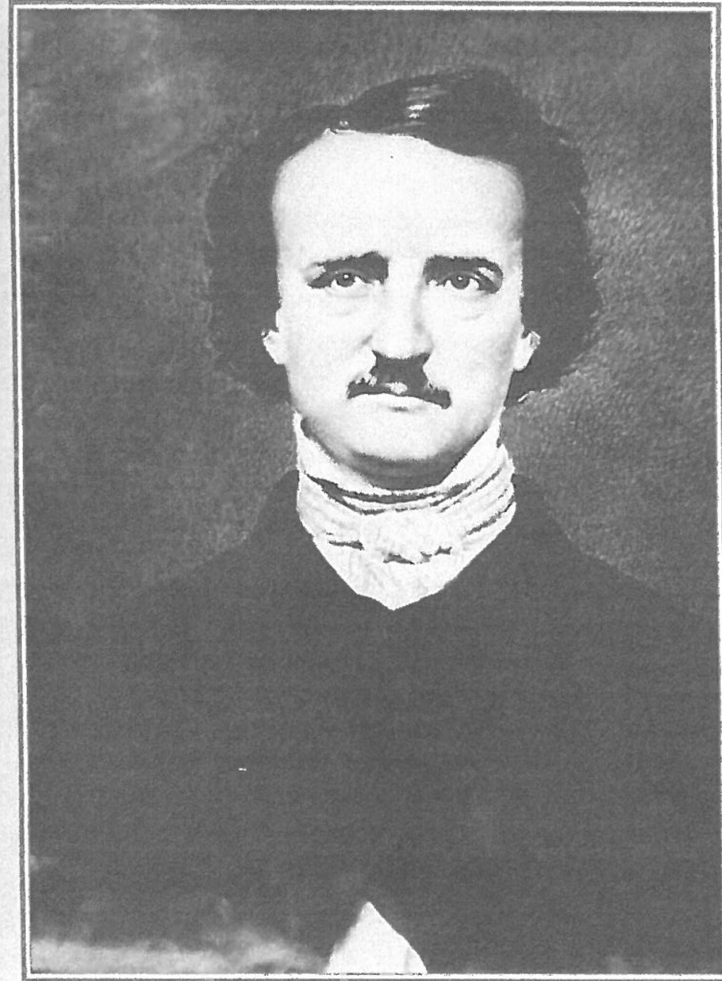
leled at irony, she wrote perfect novels, but *because* she was so very ironic, she seems to us quite detached from her characters, and she gives the impression of coldness. She judges her characters harshly. We applaud this now because we live in an age where no judgments are made in our society. We are a most socially uncivilized age, and we love Jane Austen today because her age *was* so judgmental and knew how to behave properly. But we also have to admit that her attention to the social mores of her era, her cool judgment of others, leaves us feeling that she was perhaps too intellectual, too distant, with too little heart.

Let me illustrate this point. Austen and her sister, Cassandra, rarely left home, but on one occasion Cassandra left on a distant journey and the sisters wrote letters back and forth. When Cassandra was about to leave, their neighbor, Mrs. Hall, was about to give birth to a child. Naturally when Cassandra was away, she wrote Jane and asked, "Has Mrs. Hall had her baby yet?" Jane replied, "Mrs. Hall was brought to bed yesterday, but delivered a dead child weeks before it was due, owing, the Doctor said, to a fright. I suppose she happened to look unawares at her husband." Amusing, perhaps—yet Jane Austen cannot refrain from making a joke about a tragedy so close to home.

My final observation is this: there are two literary societies, very different and very popular, in England and America. These societies are devoted to two great authors: Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. I am certainly heavily involved in the Dickens societies, or as we so aptly call them, Dickens Fellowships. Do you know what we call people who belong to the Dickens Fellowships, people who love Dickens? We are called Dickensians. And that word

Dickensian is a perfect word if you love Dickens, because *Dickensian* is a kind, gentle word, rather like the soft sentimentality of Dickens himself.

There are Jane Austen Societies as well, people who love Austen. You might think that if Dickens lovers were called Dickensians, Austen lovers would be called Austenians. But if you are in a Jane Austen Society, you are called a Janeite. And that is the perfect word for a lover of Jane Austen. As opposed to *Dickensian*, *Janeite* has a bite to it, an intellectual snap. So the difference between the sound of *Dickensian* and *Janeite* fairly well sums up the divergent gifts of these two great authors.



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Edgar Allan Poe

(1809–1849)