Who Says She's a Bourgeois Writer? Reconsidering the Social and Political Contexts of Jane Austen's Novels

Downie, J. A. (James Alan), 1951-

Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 40, Number 1, Fall 2006, pp. 69-84 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/ecs.2006.0040

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ecs/summary/v040/40.1downie.html
At the close of the eighteenth century nobles were above all great landowners, but by no means all great landowners were noblemen. The landed aristocracy has always remained a body wider in membership than the nobility.

F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*

The landed gentry of Great Britain are the only untitled aristocracy in the world.

*Burke’s Landed Gentry*

When, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood takes her elder sister to task for associating happiness with money, it quickly transpires that Elinor’s idea of wealth amounts to considerably less than Marianne’s notion of competence:

“Elinor, for shame!” said Marianne; “money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned.”

“Perhaps,” said Elinor, smiling, “we may come to the same point. Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now, we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting. Your ideas are only more noble than mine. Come, what is your competence?”

---

J. A. Downie is Professor of English at Goldsmiths’ College, University of London. He has recently completed an edition of Defoe’s *The Poor Man’s Plea* and *The Great Law of Subordination consider’d*, and is now writing a political biography of Henry Fielding.

“About eighteen hundred or two thousand a-year; not more than that.”
Elinor laughed. “Two thousand a-year! One is my wealth! I guessed how it would end.”
“And yet two thousand a-year is a very moderate income,” said Marianne.—“A family cannot well be maintained on a smaller. I am sure I am not extravagant in my demands. A proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters, cannot be supported on less.”
Elinor smiled again, to hear her sister describing so accurately their future expenses at Combe Magna.

Elinor is amused at Marianne’s account of a “proper establishment of servants” because it transparently reflects what she hopes will be the income that Willoughby, the man with whom she is in love, will have at his disposal after their marriage. Although his estate is only rated by Sir John Middleton “at about six or seven hundred a year,” Willoughby expects the death of his “old cousin,” Mrs. Smith, “to set [him] free” (S&S, 61, 280). Elinor’s amusement, however, should be allowed to detract neither from the seriousness of her remark that, without a secure and sizeable income, “every kind of external comfort must be wanting,” nor from Marianne’s observation that “two thousand a-year is a very moderate income.”

In most of her novels, Jane Austen goes to considerable lengths to offer the reader information about the financial circumstances of her characters. Interestingly, the figure of £2,000 a year cited by Marianne recurs on two separate occasions. Not only does Colonel Brandon enjoy an income of “two thousand a-year” according to Mrs. Jennings (S&S, 255), but in Pride and Prejudice “Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year.” There is no suggestion that the indolent Mr. Bennet hunts, while the horses that pull his carriage work in the home farm as often as his wife’s sociability allows. Yet the Bennets are “the principal inhabitants” of Longbourn, “the village where they lived” (P&P, 9), and they certainly keep a “proper establishment of servants.” When Mr. Collins has the temerity to enquire which of his “fair cousins” is responsible for preparing the dinner, Mrs. Bennet assures him “with some asperity that they were very well able to keep a good cook, and that her daughters have nothing to do in the kitchen” (P&P, 58).

It would have been normal for a landed gentleman with “an estate of two thousand a year” to have kept a sizeable establishment of domestic servants, and we know from Mr. Bennet’s reticence to hold a conversation with Mr. Collins until after “the servants were withdrawn” that the family is waited on at dinner (P&P, 58). The implications of this detail for assessing the extent of the Bennets’ establishment should be noted: “The butler, or principal servant, if there be more than one present, should stand with his back to the side-board, looking on the table. Other servants should stand round the table. Where no footman is kept, it is the part of the house-maid to wait at table.” Despite the tax on male servants introduced in 1780, Mr. Bennet’s household includes both a butler and a footman, while “the two housemaids” report to the housekeeper, Mrs. Hill. As it gives relevance to Lizzy’s anxious enquiry of Jane whether “there was a servant . . . who did not know the whole story [of Lydia’s elopement] before the end of the day” (P&P, 258), it is reasonable to assume that the fact that Mr. Bennet employs a number of servants in the imagined world of Pride and Prejudice is of significance.
To the domestic servants should be added the outside servants. Not only is there a home farm, but the Bennets’ grounds are sufficiently extensive for Lady Catherine de Bourgh to feel it necessary to put Lizzy in her place by observing that “you have a very small park here” (P&P, 312). In this context, the OED’s first signification of “park” is relevant: “a large ornamental piece of ground, usually attached to or surrounding a country house or mansion, and used for recreation, and often for keeping deer, cattle, and sheep.” Lady Catherine’s disparaging remark about the size of the park at Longbourn notwithstanding, we are given sufficient detail in the course of Pride and Prejudice to ascertain that it is of this sort. We are informed about “a small wood on one side of the paddock,” a “little copse,” and a “shrubbery behind the house” (P&P, 265–6). Lady Catherine even condescends to notice “a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of [the] lawn,” and Mrs. Bennet officiously advises Lizzy to “shew her ladyship about the different walks” which, apparently, include a “hermitage” (P&P, 312–3). Obviously the park at Longbourn cannot stand comparison with that at Pemberley, which is ten miles round. A “small” park which includes not only a lawn but a number of “walks” would nevertheless have required a gardener and a number of assistants to maintain it. Quite clearly, the Bennets live in a country house of some size.

I mention this because not even Pevsner has anything of interest to say about “sarcastic Mr. Bennet’s Longbourn” except to observe that it is not a mansion “such as the nearby . . . Netherfield.” While this is clearly the case, it is important not to underestimate the scale of the establishment at Longbourn as this can lead to serious misunderstanding of Mr. Bennet’s social status. Habakkuk, who opens his account of English landownership by citing the example of the fictitious Mr. Bennet, concludes that he was “not exactly one of the lesser gentry.” While incomes of the “lesser gentry” ranged from £1,000 to £3,000 in the nineteenth century, in 1790 £2,000 was the average income, not of a mere country gentleman, but of a baronet. Landed incomes, whether from rents or from farming, began to rise steeply in the 1790s—the decade in which, it is agreed, Pride and Prejudice is set. While Mr. Bennet’s “estate of two thousand a year” is therefore quite clearly that of a prosperous member of the landed gentry and most certainly not that of an impoverished country gentleman struggling to make ends meet.

Much of the action in Austen’s novels derives from questions of social status, and she takes considerable pains to accord the awkward social position of the Bennet daughters the prominence it clearly would have merited in English society at the turn of the nineteenth century. In this context, Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s response to Lizzy’s insistence that she is “a gentleman’s daughter” is revealing: “‘True. You are a gentleman’s daughter. But who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition’” (P&P, 316). The Bennets’ “low connections” are a source of malicious glee to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst from their first acquaintance with “dear Jane”:

... Mrs. Hurst began again.
“I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it.”
“I think I have heard you say, that their uncle is an attorney in Meryton.”
“Yes, and they have another, who lives somewhere near Cheapside.”
“That is capital,” added her sister, and they both laughed heartily. (P&P, 31)

In forming an attachment to an attorney’s daughter rather than the daughter of a landed gentleman, Mr. Bennet has married beneath himself, and this, in turn, threatens to compromise his daughters’ standing in society. It is of course one of the most powerful points of Austen’s social satire in *Pride and Prejudice* that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are apt to forget “that their brother’s fortune and their own had been acquired by trade” (P&P, 12), while the Gardiners’ manners are so polished that Darcy is able to take them “for people of fashion” (P&P, 224).

Although Darcy, in his letter to Lizzy, also draws attention to the Bennet family’s “want of propriety,” and its general “want of connection” (P&P, 176), when he asks her to introduce him to her uncle and aunt during the chance meeting at Pemberley, “she could hardly suppress a smile, at his being now seeking the acquaintance of some of those very people, against whom his pride had revolted, in his offer to herself” (P&P, 224). The Gardiners may live in Cheapside but they can be taken “for people of fashion” on account of their polished manners, their dress, and their general deportment. Their good taste prevents Darcy from assuming that they are the “low connections” to whom he referred so disparagingly in his letter. It is a signal indication of the layers of conscious irony at work in Austen’s fiction that the final sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* concerns the Gardiners, because they complicate the novel’s social hierarchy in an important way. In the end, Lizzy’s relatives from Cheapside become the most welcome of guests at Pemberley. “With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms,” Austen writes. “Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them” (P&P, 345).

What Austen describes in *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as in her other novels, is the complex interaction of the various groups which made up the ruling class of Georgian England. Amanda Vickery’s study, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, reveals the significance of Lizzy’s insistence that she is “a gentleman’s daughter.” “In parochial terms, the lesser gentry, the genteel trades and the respectable old professional families constituted the local elite,” Vickery explains. “In national terms, contemporaries thought of them as the polite, below the quality, but occupying a comfortable eminence from which to patronize the vulgar.” Mr. Bennet “was not exactly one of the lesser gentry,” Mrs. Bennet was the daughter of an attorney, and Sir William Lucas, until he had “risen to the honour of a knighthood,” was “formerly in trade” (P&P, 14). What country gentlemen, lawyers, and substantial provincial tradesmen had in common, however, was that they were all, in their various ways, members of the governing class.

Although *The Gentleman’s Daughter* is mainly a study of the local elite in the district surrounding Burnley, Nelson, and Colne in the western Pennines, one has only to open the pages of *Emma* to recognize that similar concerns operated in Austen’s imaginary Surrey village at the turn of the nineteenth century. Highbury, “the large and populous Surrey village at the turn of the nineteenth century. Highbury, “the large and populous village almost amounting to a town,” is dominated by two families. With one important exception, Highbury is part of the Donwell Abbey estate which belongs to Mr. Knightley. There is a home farm at Donwell Abbey, as there is at Longbourn, although it is clear that, as most of his income derives from his landed property, Knightley largely lives off the rents he is paid by prosperous tenant-farmers such as Robert Martin. We know all this because
of what Austen tells us about the circumstances of the Woodhouses. “The landed property of Hartfield certainly was inconsiderable,” we are told, “being but a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate, to which all the rest of Highbury belonged.” However, the Woodhouses’ “fortune, from other sources, was such as to make them scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself, in every other kind of consequence” (E, 123).

The rest of the inhabitants of Highbury and the surrounding district are less well established, and we are given a clear insight into the sort of considerations which govern social interaction when Emma is placed in the awkward position of having to decide whether to accept an invitation to dinner from the Coles:

The Coles had been settled some years at Highbury, and were very good sort of people—friendly, liberal, and unpretending; but, on the other hand, they were of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel. (E, 185–6)

Like Mr. Weston, the Coles are “rising into gentility and property.” The problem is that they are newcomers who have only recently acquired a house in the countryside:

On their first coming into the country, they had lived in proportion to their income, quietly, keeping little company, and that little unexpensively; but the last year or two had brought them a considerable increase of means—the house in town had yielded greater profits, and fortune in general had smiled on them. With their wealth, their views increased; their want of a larger house, their inclination for more company. They added to their house, to their number of servants, to their expenses of every sort; and by this time were, in fortune and style of living, second only to the family at Hartfield. (E, 186)

Emma is acutely aware of her pre-eminent position, and Austen is having fun at her character’s expense. Hitherto unrivalled—there is as yet no mistress of Donwell Abbey—Emma does not care very much for the idea that the Coles are second only to the Woodhouses in consequence in Highbury society:

Their love of society, and their new dining-room, prepared every body for their keeping dinner-company; and a few parties, chiefly among the single men, had already taken place. The regular and best families Emma could hardly suppose they would presume to invite—neither Donwell, nor Hartfield, or Randalls. Nothing should tempt her to go, if they did; and she regretted that her father’s known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish. The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them. This lesson, she very much feared, they would receive only from herself; she had little hope of Mr. Knightley, none of Mr. Weston. (E, 186)

Narrated as “free indirect discourse,” this is Emma’s view of things rather than Austen’s, and by the time “the insult” of being invited to dinner by the Coles actually happens, she thinks rather differently about the matter. As she is the last to be invited, the prospect of “being left in solitary grandeur, even supposing the omission to be intended as a compliment, was but poor comfort” (E, 187). That
Frank Churchill is already wondering whether a dance will follow the dinner merely adds to her discomfiture.

However, the crowning example of the paramount importance of rank in the novel is illustrated by the excruciating episode in which Emma is propositioned by Mr. Elton in the coach returning from the family party at Randalls. After it is over, Emma reflects with some asperity upon the temerity of a man who is “without any alliances but in trade” having the gall to pay his addresses to “Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds:"

But—that he should talk of encouragement, should consider her as aware of his views, accepting his attentions, meaning (in short), to marry him!—should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind!—look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself shewing no presumption in addressing her!—It was most provoking.

Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior. He must know that the Woodhouses had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, the younger branch of a very ancient family—and that the Elt ons were nobody. (E, 123)

Although the passage is again narrated as free indirect discourse, and we are therefore being allowed access to her innermost thoughts, it is clear that what irks Emma the most is that, in aspiring to the hand of a Miss Woodhouse, Mr. Elton has unaccountably allowed all considerations of hierarchy to be suspended.

**SIR THOMAS BERTRAM’S SOCIAL STANDING**

While there can be little doubt, therefore, of the social status of any of the characters in *Emma*, the same cannot be said about *Mansfield Park*. True, the implications of what we are informed at the outset have been painstakingly analyzed:

About thirty years ago [i.e. in 1784?], Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match; and her uncle, the lawyer, himself allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. . .14

It has been suggested that if £10,000 was thought to be the going rate for an alliance with Sir Thomas Bertram, then his income must have been around £5,000 a year.15 This, however, takes no account of the rise in revenue from land from the 1790s onwards. If we accept the dating of the ball given in Fanny’s honor as Thursday, 22 December 1808,16 Sir Thomas travels to Antigua with his elder son in 1805, returning to England himself in the autumn of 1807. I shall comment on the historical importance of these dates in due course. The point I want to establish at the outset is simply that Austen hints that Sir Thomas’s income is higher than
£5,000 a year when the main action in the novel takes place. Mary Crawford is an heiress worth twice the £10,000 Miss Maria Ward’s lawyer-uncle thought the going rate for an alliance with Sir Thomas Bertram, Bart., “[a]bout thirty years ago,” yet there is some doubt whether “[t]he eldest son of a baronet was not too good for a girl of twenty thousand pounds” (*MP*, 37).

More importantly, the opening paragraph of *Mansfield Park* sheds no light on how Sir Thomas’s income has been accrued. This has become an issue of consuming interest in Austen studies. As Kathryn Sutherland puts it:

> What is fruitfully unclear throughout the novel is the nature of the Bertrams’ family identity, and hence the problem of how we are to interpret the threats to undermine it. Is it an old established landed elite, a linearly ordered model drawing its nourishment exteriorly; or is it a “new” commercial family, inward-looking and defensive?\(^{17}\)

While I have no desire to clarify what is fruitfully unclear, Austen nonetheless supplies a number of clear indicators of the social status of Sir Thomas Bertram, Bart., M.P. He is the owner of an extensive landed estate in Northamptonshire, which includes the right of presentation to two family livings. Until around the time of Fanny Price’s arrival at Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas also maintained a second residence in London which Lady Bertram had been accustomed to “occupy every spring.” Although it is silent about the fate of this property, the text clearly states that Lady Bertram “gave up the house in town,” Austen contenting herself with the wry observation that she thereafter “remained wholly in the country, leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence” (*MP*, 17).

Sir Thomas is also the owner of a “West Indian property” in Antigua, however, and as far as I can tell it is the mere existence of this estate which raises the issue of whether the Bertrams are an old, established landed family. Since scholars first started to draw conclusions from Sir Thomas’s ownership of an estate in Antigua, and more especially since the publication in 1993 of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, writers on Austen have jumped to the conclusion that Mansfield Park must have been acquired by the Bertrams out of the profits of a sugar plantation dependent on slave labor.\(^{18}\) It is for this reason, one assumes, that Brian Southam asserts that: “There is something distinctly ‘modern-built’, *nouveau* and West Indian about Sir Thomas and his social standing.”\(^{19}\) True, Mansfield Park is described by Austen as a “modern” house, and it cannot be denied that “West Indians” bought estates in England. Absenteeism was rife among prominent owners of West Indian plantations in the middle of the eighteenth century, and Habakkuk observes that

> Of the thirteen MPs elected in 1761 who were West Indians on the strict definition all except two owned landed estates in Britain, and most of the eight or nine MPs in the outer ring did so. It is a reasonable deduction that most of the chief planter families acquired estates in Britain.\(^{20}\)

What is missing is any suggestion in the text of *Mansfield Park* that, “on the strict definition,” Sir Thomas Bertram is a West Indian. Of course it is perfectly possible to argue that Austen elides this crucial “fact” in the same way that she is
supposed to have elided the implications of Sir Thomas being the owner of a “West Indian property” (MP, 3). Without an authorial indication from Austen to the contrary, however, it is difficult not to accept the conclusion that: “She presented the Bertrams as ordinary members of the English landowning classes.”

To assume that the “Antiguan estate” was a sugar plantation worked by slaves begs several questions. “Absentee-proprietorship in the British West Indies began, not with the sugar industry, but with the first English colonizations and the establishment of forms of proprietary government,” writes Douglas Hall. “Thus, from the time of the earliest settlements in the Leeward Islands and in Barbados, there existed a distinction between ‘colonists’ and ‘proprietors.’” Observing that “different sources of absentee-proprietorship produced different kinds of absenteeism,” Hall enumerates four types of absentees: 1) those absentee-proprietors who acquired their estates in the seventeenth century prior to the establishment of the sugar plantations and who had never been resident in the West Indies; 2) Habakkuk’s “West Indians on the strict definition,” men born and bred in the West Indies who acquired the estates in Britain on which they lived from fortunes made from sugar; 3) people resident in Britain who inherited property in the West Indies (“On the inheritance of estates in the colonies,” Hall explains, “they were free to choose either to remain in Britain or to go and assume, or resume, residence on the estates”); 4) “creditors in Britain [who] came, however reluctantly, into possession of unprofitable West India estates on which they had lien.” (Interestingly, this final kind of absentee described by Hall dates specifically from “the later eighteenth century when the profitability of West India estates generally declined.”)

Given the little that we are told by Austen about Sir Thomas’s “West Indian property,” it is striking that critics have tended simply to assume that he is the head of a planter family which has acquired Mansfield Park in the recent past. Those who do so often reveal little more than their lack of understanding about English society at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus Clara Tuite, observing that the “class-location of the Bertram family is of course notoriously difficult to pin down,” insists that Mansfield Park is marked “with the ‘neither gentry nor nobility’ impulses of a ‘middle-class aristocracy.’” Tuite presumably derives her notion of a “middle-class aristocracy” from Nancy Armstrong, who not only “links the history of British fiction to the empowering of the middle classes in England through the dissemination of a new female ideal,” but also invents “a class that was neither gentry nor nobility . . . a paradoxical configuration that can only be called a middle-class aristocracy.” It is not entirely clear to me whether this “middle-class aristocracy” exists below or between the nobility and gentry. The inappropriateness of Armstrong’s terminology to describe the social structure at the turn of the nineteenth century is nevertheless clearly indicated when she writes about the several changes [that] have occurred between the publication of Pamela and the writing of Emma. The gap between master and servant has narrowed down considerably to an elite group of individuals who are neither aristocrats nor laborers, nor even of the mercantile and industrial classes. At the same time, a whole spectrum of fine distinctions has opened up within this politically limited field. Among these are traditional political markers that designate one’s source of income, the prestige of an estate and family name, one’s future prospects, and the external signs of polish
and education a person of means happens to display. Such social markings invoke the late eighteenth century country gentry which the previous century of economic fluctuation had made an extremely heterogeneous group. In such a group, an individual’s social identity was no doubt very difficult to read.

On this view, neither Knightley, the owner of Donwell Abbey, nor Emma Woodhouse, the heiress of Hartfield, is an aristocrat. Although Armstrong concentrates on *Emma* rather than *Mansfield Park*, her analysis is applicable to both novels. According to Armstrong, Austen’s novels “deal with a closed community of polite people who tend to be undistinguished by either great fortune or title.” It is certainly true that Austen’s central characters are not members of the nobility, but Sir Thomas Bertram and Sir Walter Elliot are baronets, Darcy is the owner of an extensive estate in Derbyshire, and many of her other characters own sizeable landed estates.

Perhaps the reason that Armstrong “detect[s] the presence of a ‘middle class,’ as we mean it today, much earlier” in history is that she conceives it as including “virtually all people who distinguished themselves from the aristocracy, on the one hand, and from the laboring poor on the other.” In doing so, Armstrong fails to appreciate that, time out of mind, the English aristocracy has consisted of the nobility and the landed gentry, the titled and the untitled alike. Not only were they conventionally regarded as the most important members of the gentry, “Nobles [were] truly called Gentlemen, by the course and custome of England.” Despite the challenge to the old, established gentry posed by the burgeoning bourgeoisie which is chronicled with such perception and precision in Austen’s novels, the situation had not changed by the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus while she is right to conclude that, as a baronet, Sir Thomas is not a member of the nobility, Tuite is wrong to argue that “the Bertrams are not technically aristocratic, but of the landed gentry.”

Austen does not tell us when the Bertrams acquired their baronetcy. The title of baronet was invented by James I in 1611 in order to raise money. The Bertrams, therefore, could have bought their baronetcy in the early seventeenth century, *before* acquiring their “West Indian property.” Alternatively, the title could have been conferred on a scion of the family *during* the seventeenth century. This happened to the real-life William Stapleton, governor of the Leeward Islands between 1672 and 1686, who “married into the Russell family, the biggest planters on Nevis, acquired large properties in all four islands [including Antigua], and received a baronetcy in 1679.” One of his successors, Christopher Codrington, “commander in chief of the Leeward Islands from 1689 to 1698, was a seasoned planter-politician, an imperious leader, and the owner of huge estates in Barbados and Antigua.” In drawing attention to real-life seventeenth-century people, I do not mean to imply that Austen was intending to refer to real-life Antiguan planters, merely that, *pace* Williams, Said, Southam, *et al.*, the text of *Mansfield Park* is silent not only on the question of when the Bertrams acquired their “West Indian property,” but on the question of what sort of “estate” it was.

If it is “fruitfully unclear” whether the Bertrams are members of the “old established landed elite,” it must also be unclear whether Sir Thomas is “a great West Indian.” For this argument to hold he would have had to have made his
money at a time when few baronets were being created. In order to have acquired
the title of baronet, either Sir Thomas Bertram, or his father, or his grandfather,
or his great-grandfather would have had to possess an extensive landed estate in
England. This circumstance would have applied whether the Bertrams bought their
baronetcy from James I or had it conferred upon them by one of the Hanoverian
monarchs. As very few baronets were created in the middle of the eighteenth century
compared to the large number conferred during the reigns of James I, Charles I, and
Charles II, it would, in fact, have been much more likely that the title had been in
the Bertram family since the seventeenth century. Instead of being the origin of the
family’s fortune, therefore, the “West Indian property” could have been acquired
subsequent to the establishment of the Bertram family at Mansfield Park.

I am aware that, in arguing this way, I am treating Sir Thomas Bertram as
if he were a real-life, historical personage rather than a fictional character. However,
it seems to me that one cannot elect to comment on the historical circumstances
of his possessing an estate in Antigua, and whether Sir Thomas is a “great West
Indian,” while at the same time choosing to ignore other issues such as how long
the baronetcy had been in the Bertram family, and when Mansfield Park was
purchased. Not only would it have been highly unlikely that a baronet would
have been a “great West Indian” by the time Mansfield Park came to be written,
but many modern eighteenth-century houses were built (often rebuilt) on estates
that had been in the family for generations. Instead of assuming on the basis of
“a single reference in Chapter Sixteen” to Crabbe’s Tales that the main action in
Mansfield Park takes place sometime after 1812, it is worth pointing out that, if
Chapman’s dating of the ball at Mansfield Park as 22 December 1808 is correct,
then Fanny’s question about the slave trade is particularly well-timed. Working
backwards from the autumn of 1808, Sir Thomas leaves for the West Indies in
1805, returning, just in time to interrupt the “theatricals,” in 1807. If this is so,
then his sojourn in Antigua coincides with the actual abolition of the slave trade.
Were we to speculate further that the purpose of his trip was to bolster his finances
by selling an estate which was making “such poor returns” (MP, 26), then the
new legislation might reasonably have been a complicating factor accounting for
the delay in Sir Thomas’s completing his business which means that Tom returns
home on his own:

Unfavourable circumstances had suddenly arisen at a moment when he
was beginning to turn all his thoughts towards England, and the very
great uncertainty in which everything was then involved determined him
on sending home his son, and waiting the final arrangement by himself.  
(MP, 33)

Not only do these “unfavourable circumstances” permit the rehearsals for the
“theatricals” to take place in Sir Thomas’s absence, the note of finality in Austen’s
description of the transaction in which Sir Thomas has been involved, together with
the fact that the West Indian property is never mentioned again, strongly suggests
that the Antiguan estate has been sold.

In sum, although Austen, for once, is insufficiently precise about the social
origins of the Bertrams—she does not, for instance, clarify the matter, as she does in
the case of the Woodhouses in Emma, by describing them as “the younger branch
of a very ancient family”—it is wrong to imply that there is anything “slippery” about their “class-location,” let alone to jump to the conclusion that “[t]here is something distinctly ‘modern-built’, *nouveau* and West Indian about Sir Thomas and his social standing.”36 Regardless of the origins of their wealth, the Bertrams are quite clearly landed gentry of some substance. As such they are aristocratic, not “liminally aristocratic.” Austen may have been “writing at a time when aristocratic and bourgeois families, landed and landless gentry families, were in a state of transition,”37 but there is nothing bourgeois about the Bertrams.

A BOURGEOIS JANE AUSTEN?

What is striking about these attempts to re-position the novels within a bourgeois or “middle-class” framework, however, is not merely their inability accurately to describe the social status of the central characters, but the confusion about Austen’s own background which almost invariably accompanies them. I do not understand why critics find it so difficult to “place” Austen. It used to be a critical commonplace that, although the Austens were not well off, they were representative members of the gentry.38 True, as I have pointed out, Austen’s novels are preoccupied with issues of entitlement and rank. Given the precariousness of their author’s own status as an impoverished, unmarried woman, this is scarcely surprising. However, as Terry Lovell explains, “[t]he Austens had innumerable family connections with the wealthier gentry, and as such they were typical of those who followed professions in the church, law, or the armed services.” “They should properly be seen as a subaltern section of the dominant gentry class,” she continues, “rather than an independent social stratum.”39 Nikolaus Pevsner goes further:

> in the description of setting there is enough to be got out of the novels for anyone eager to know what life was lived by the narrow range of classes which Jane Austen knew well and which she wisely confined herself to. These classes are represented by the major house or mansion and the parsonage and by various houses or lodgings in London and a number of resorts.

While one might argue about particular details, Pevsner’s account of the social context of Austen’s novels remains sound:

> Daughter of a parson, grand-niece of a Master of Balliol, sister of a squire, sister of a parson and cousin of a parson, and sister of two admirals, this was the world she knew, and in it she moves without any hesitation, and in placing and, if not describing, at least indicating habitats she never put a foot wrong.40

Given these circumstances, it is surprising that, as David Spring pointed out in an influential essay twenty years ago, in the process of “calling Jane Austen’s society bourgeois,” critics seem to have “plumped for a bourgeois Jane Austen.”41 Spring’s solution to what he clearly regarded as a problem was to borrow a term invented by the regional historian Alan Everitt, “the pseudo-gentry,” in order to provide “a helpful substitute for the word bourgeois, having in mind the latter’s misleading overtones.” Unfortunately, in attempting to remove one potential misunderstanding about the social context of Austen’s novels, it seems to me that Spring
only succeeded in introducing another. According to Everitt, the “pseudo-gentry” could be distinguished from “titled magnates or landed gentry living on the rents from their estates” because they “consisted predominantly of professional people and families evidently living in the style of gentry, supported by their own private means, although not possessing any considerable landed property.” Taking his lead from Everitt, Spring argued that the “pseudo-gentry were ‘pseudo’ because they were not landowners in the same sense as the gentry and aristocracy were. They cannot be said to have owned landed estates. But they were gentry of a sort, primarily because they sought strenuously to be taken for gentry.”

Who, then, in Austen’s “social world,” does this accurately describe? Clearly not Sir Thomas Bertram nor Sir Walter Elliot, nor Fitzwilliam Darcy nor George Knightley nor Sir John Middleton nor John Dashwood: All of these characters are extensive landowners. In Everitt’s terms, they are not “pseudo-gentry,” but gentry. Spring could scarcely be describing Mr. Bennet either because, as I have already remarked, he is the owner of a landed estate worth £2,000 per annum and therefore described by Habakkuk as “not exactly one of the lesser gentry.” Perhaps he is referring to the Woodhouses, and the “sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate” which is Hartfield. “The landed property of Hartfield certainly was inconsiderable,” Emma concedes, but then the Woodhouses were “the younger branch of a very ancient family.” It is therefore equally difficult to see what is “pseudo” about the Woodhouses. While the Coles, the Eltons, and perhaps even the Westons, could reasonably be described as “pseudo-gentry,” the term is not particularly helpful in describing the central characters of Austen’s novels.

Why, then, is there so much difficulty when it comes to describing the social status of Austen and her characters? I think it goes all the way back to a misreading of Scott who, in his celebrated review, observed that “the author of Emma confined herself chiefly to the middling classes of society.” This appears to have been taken, wrongly, to mean that Scott implied that Austen was writing about the bourgeoise. However, Scott is not only differentiating Austen’s fiction from that of Maria Edgeworth, whose “scenes,” he writes, “are laid in higher life,” he also goes on to remark that Austen’s “most distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies.” True, he notes that “those which are sketched with most originality and precision, belong to a class rather below that standard,” but that, as I have explained, provides much of the frisson in Emma. It is how the heroine reacts to people like the Westons, the Eltons, the Coles and, above all, decayed gentlewomen like Miss Bates and her niece, Jane Fairfax, which is at the heart of Austen’s novel.

Scott, then, is writing not about the “middle classes” per se, but about “well-bred country gentlemen and ladies.” What appears to be at issue here is confusion about the very use of the term, “middle class.” In a recent article in the Daily Telegraph, the American journalist Janet Daley observed that: “It has always seemed significant to me that in the US the term ‘middle class’ means ‘middle-income’—that is, ordinary people—whereas in Britain, it means ‘bourgeois’ with all the Marxist connotations.” This is perceptive, and is applicable to much recent Austen criticism. Although there are a couple of baronets and a sprinkling of knights, the central characters in Austen’s novels are not members of the nobility. Three of the richest men—Darcy, Rushworth, and Knightley—are not distinguished by any
title at all. As Scott remarks, “her most distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies.” This should not be taken to mean that the central characters in Austen’s novels are “middle class” or “middle income,” however, let alone bourgeois. As they are mostly wealthy landowners living off the rents from their estates, it is inappropriate to consider them as anything other than members of the nation’s ruling class, the landed gentry.

Perhaps the modern confusion about how to analyze Austen’s characters in class terms can be traced back to two influential studies published in the early 1950s. In *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952), Marvin Mudrick laid great emphasis on the bourgeois elements in Austen’s fiction although at the same time, interestingly enough, he expressed reservations about the appropriateness of using the terms “bourgeois” and “middle class” to describe the social context of the novels. 47 A year earlier, in his essay on *Emma* in *An Introduction to the English Novel*, Arnold Kettle confusingly observed in passing that “Jane Austen, a genteel bourgeoise of the turn of the eighteenth century [sic], could scarcely be expected to analyse class society in modern terms.” 48 As the OED’s first signification of “Genteel” is “Belonging to or included among the gentry; or a rank above the commonalty,” it could be argued that to describe anyone as “a genteel bourgeoise” is actually a contradiction in terms. By insisting on Austen’s bourgeois credentials, albeit in such a confusing way, Kettle and Mudrick introduced a misleading way of describing the social world of her novels which continues to exert considerable influence today.

It makes perfect sense to describe Austen as “genteel,” on the other hand, because it rightly implies that she belongs among the gentry. She should herself be included among the “well-bred country gentlemen and ladies” she describes in her novels, and not within the ranks of the middle classes or the “pseudo-gentry.” In this essay I have argued that, together, the nobility and gentry made up the British aristocracy at the turn of the nineteenth, just as they continued to do until well into the twentieth century. Park Honan therefore is virtually spot on when he writes that

> The Austens were country gentry. This put them well beneath the British aristocracy and a niche below most baronets and squires of the wealthy landed gentry. Mr Austen lacked money and a good estate, but as an Oxford-educated clergyman he hovered at the gentry’s lower fringes. 49

While Austen was in fact descended on her mother’s side from members of the titled nobility, the gentry circles to which she belonged as a parson’s daughter tended to be those of the impoverished lesser gentry. Certainly, in financial terms, she was never well off. This applies particularly to the uncomfortable years which followed the death of her father. On its own, however, this does not make her “middle class,” either in terms of wealth or of social status. In the same way that Austen’s “well-bred country gentlemen and ladies” were genteel rather than bourgeois, so was their creator.

**NOTES**

I should like to thank Alistair M. Duckworth for his most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, John V. Beckett for information about baronets, and Keith Wrightson for assistance with the concept of the “pseudo-gentry.”


5. *Trusler’s Domestic Management, or the Art of Conducting a Family . . . with full Instructions to Servants* (London, 1819), 145, 116.

6. The Bennets’ butler puts in his appearance on Mr. Bennet’s return from his ineffectual pursuit of Lydia in London. It is he who, after an express has arrived for their father from Mr. Gardiner, directs Lizzy and Jane “towards the little copse” (*P&P*, 266). The note from Miss Bingley to Miss Bennet inviting her to Netherfield when her brother and the other gentlemen are to dine with the officers is delivered by “the footman” (*P&P*, 25).


10. Austen makes it quite clear that, despite Mrs. Bennet having “no turn for economy,” Mr. Bennet’s “love of independence . . . prevented their exceeding their income” (*P&P*, 272). What is irresponsible about Mr. Bennet’s behavior, however, is his failure, given that his estate is entailed on a male heir, not to have put aside a sufficient portion of his income to ensure that his daughters’ status as members of the gentry would be assured after his death.


16. See Jane Austen, *The Novels of Jane Austen: The Text Based on Collation of the Early Editions*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934), 3:554. Chapman’s dating is based on the “virtually certain” belief that Austen used an almanac when writing her novels. The ball takes place on Thursday, 22 December. As 22 December fell on a Thursday in 1808, but did not do so again until after *Mansfield Park* had been published in 1814, it strongly suggests that the ball is held in that year. The ball, in turn, takes place a year after Sir Thomas’s return from Antigua. If we accept this dating, then Sir Thomas’s journey to the West Indies took place between 1805 and 1807.

A later date for the action in *Mansfield Park* has recently been suggested, based on the fact that one of the books Fanny has on her table in the east room during the rehearsals for the theatricals—Crabbe’s *Tales in Verse*—was published in September 1812. See Brian Southam, “The Silence of the Bertrams,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 February 1995, reprinted in *Jane Austen, Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia...
L. Johnson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 493–8 (see 494). Chapman was of course aware of the publication date of Crabbe’s Tales when he proposed his earlier dating, and Southam’s case is presented with more confidence than is warranted by “a single reference in Chapter Sixteen” of Mansfield Park to “Crabbe’s Tales” (MP, 141).


21. What I find awkward about the argument that Austen elides the implications of Sir Thomas’s ownership of an estate in Antigua is that if she felt, consciously or unconsciously, that it was necessary to do so, then why did she take the artistic decision to introduce a colonial dimension in the first place? Exactly the same point might be made about her decision to permit Fanny to ask Sir Thomas a question about the slave trade.


23. Critics sometimes refer, without any textual authority, to Sir Thomas’s “West Indian plantation.” However, the phrases actually employed by Austen are much less specific. They are: “his West Indian property” (MP, 3); “his West India Estate” (MP, 20); and “the Antigua estate” (MP, 26).


27. Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction, 63.


31. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves, 135.

32. It seems to me that one of the purposes of describing Mansfield Park as a “modern-built” house is to distinguish it from Sotherton Court, and to pre-empt any suggestion that it needs the attentions of an “improver” like Repton.


34. The legislation abolishing the slave trade received the royal assent on 25 March 1807 (Journals of the House of Commons, 62:290). It came into effect on 1 May 1807 (Public General Acts 47. Geo. 3 (1807), 315). The abolition of the slave trade should not be confused with the abolition of slavery in 1833.
35. There is no further mention of the Antiguan estate after Sir Thomas’s return to Mansfield Park, although, at the time of the ball given for Fanny, he discusses the balls of Antigua with Fanny’s brother, William (see MP, 227). On this point, see also Lloyd, “Myths of the Indies,” 66.


38. Q. D. Leavis, for instance, recognized that the gentry included “even such really poor” representatives of the class “as the Austens.” See her Collected Essays: Volume I: The Englishness of the English Novel, ed. G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 37.


40. Pevsner, “The Architectural Setting of Jane Austen’s Novels,” 404. Austen was the sister of “a squire”—in other words, a wealthy landowner—only because her brother Edward became Thomas Knight’s adoptive heir, while her brothers Frank and Charles each rose to the rank of admiral as a consequence of seniority after lengthy naval careers. Through her mother’s side of the family, Austen was however connected with the nobility.


42. Alan Everitt, “Kentish Family Portrait: An Aspect of the Rise of the Pseudo-Gentry,” Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500–1800: Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W. G. Hoskins, C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden, eds. (London: Longman, 1974), 170. Professor Everitt was writing about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kent, and the term, “pseudo-gentry,” is not without its critics. According to Keith Wrightson, “pseudo gentry” is “a term which has its utility, but which is also much too disparaging both in its attribution of pretence and in its implication of uncritical social emulation.” See Keith Wrightson, Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1640–1750 (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 305. Another major problem with the term is that, like Armstrong’s “middle-class aristocracy,” it could be extended to include virtually everyone between the nobility and the laboring poor. As Amanda Vickery pertinently observes about gentlewomen in Georgian England: “The provincial women at the heart of this study hailed from families headed by lesser landed gentlemen, attorneys [sic], doctors, clerics, merchants and manufacturers. As a group they described themselves as ‘polite’, ‘civil’, ‘genteel’, ‘well-bred’ and ‘polished’ . . . Yet they did not pretend to be members of ‘the quality’, the people of fashion, the cosmopolitan beau monde or the ton, although they were not above harping on their exalted acquaintances among the nobility or the antiquity of their lineage when they saw fit . . . ‘the polite’ and ‘the genteel’ are the only terms consistently used by the women studied here to convey their social prestige. They had no recourse to a vocabulary of ‘upper’, ‘middle’ and ‘lower class’” (Vickery, The Gentleman’s Daughter, 13).

43. Spring, “Interpreters of Jane Austen’s Social World,” 60.


45. It is noteworthy that, in Guy Mannering, Scott actually uses the phrase “nobility and gentry” to describe the British ruling class, albeit that he puts it in the mouth of the Scottish baronet, Sir Robert Hazlewood (Chapter XLII).


49. Park Honan, Jane Austen: Her Life (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 29–30. My only quibble with this description is the implicit restriction of the “British aristocracy” to the nobility, rather than the nobility and the gentry.