

Age and Money in Austenland

Growing Older with Jane Austen

By Maggie Lane.

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Review by Susan Allen Ford.

First meetings of Janeites often involve narratives of origin: how did our love of Jane Austen begin? Answering such questions involves excavating, and often simplifying, what Prospero calls “the dark backward and abysm of time,” reminding us of the pleasures of past discoveries, of our connections to past selves. Maggie Lane’s *Growing Older with Jane Austen* appeals to our recognition not of where we’ve been, but of where we’re going. To resort again to Shakespeare (this time to Jacques, who quotes the fool he meets in the Forest of Arden): “From hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot; / And thereby hangs a tale.”

Lane’s project is not to explore the changes in Austen’s readers as they grow older. Instead, she looks at fictional characters as well as Austen’s family and contemporaries to discover what it means to grow old in Jane Austen’s world. Though Austen’s heroines range in age from seventeen to twenty-seven, the novels, of course, are also populated by their elders, and Lane devotes chapters to parents, old wives, old maids, aging men, merry widows, despotic dowagers, and poor widows—as well as to money (including wills), illness, and death. Characters and details related to the processes of aging make appearances in multiple chapters as Lane suggests the far-reaching implications of growing old in Austen’s world.



Courtesy of A Room Of One’s Own Press in the publication *Life in the Country*.

Aging is likely to mean the diminishing prospect of marriage for some and death of a spouse for others—as well as illness and financial loss. With the wealth of detail she assembles from both fictional and biographical materials, Maggie Lane provides a view of the intersection of Austen’s real and fictional worlds. The chapter “Not the Only Widow in Bath” examines the young Jane Austen’s experience—and apparent impatience—with the widows who flocked to the town for its economical and lively pleasures as well as medical care: in an 1801 letter, she refers to Lady Fust, Mrs. Busby, and Mrs. Owen, three card-playing friends of her uncle and aunt, as “the three old Toughs.” Fourteen years later, writing *Persuasion*, Austen peoples Bath with widows and widowers—Sir Walter, Mr. Elliot, Lady Russell, Lady Dalrymple, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Clay, and perhaps even Mrs. Speed and Nurse Rooke—some of whom she treats with admiring sympathy, others with judgmental irony. Lane examines Mrs. Clay (more sympathetically than Anne does) and the admirable Mrs. Smith, who is rewarded with a share in Anne and Wentworth’s happiness. But she also acknowledges the unresolved complexity of Mrs. Smith’s characterization, given her “cunning” advice to Anne to marry Mr. Elliot, a duplicity attributed to the desperation of her circumstances. The discussion of these characters is interesting, but Lane also—in what was to me a startling parallel—contrasts Mrs. Smith’s change and growth over twelve years to the absence of change over the last thirteen in her contemporary, Elizabeth Elliot. *Growing Older with Jane Austen* is full of striking insights into character.

Though Lane’s readings of Austen’s characters are sometimes open to challenge, her observations are always rewarding. Whereas she sees Edward Ferrars, for example, as an excusably depressed victim of his manipulative mother, I detect more irony in Austen’s presentation. Lane’s comparison of Mrs. Ferrars and Lady Catherine de Bourgh—two “Dowager Despots”—leads her to conclude that the difference between Edward and Darcy

is money (i.e., the independence that money brings). I’m less certain that the distinction is reducible to one trait, however significant. But Lane’s discussion



of Austen’s artistry is nonetheless fascinating. She points to the way that “Mrs. Ferrars is felt as a constant but distant presence, a malign figure always to contend with” and that Austen, unusually, provides a detailed physical description—though delays it until far into the novel, well after the despotic dowager’s consequence is understood. She also notes that although Mrs. Ferrars says only fifteen words, her presence is vivid because of the malign impact she has on “everyone whose lives she touches.” In the same chapter, Lane considers the contrast between Mrs. Ferrars and Willoughby’s cousin Mrs. Smith—another older woman who tries to manage behavior, but from moral rather than mercenary principles.

The book’s final chapter, predictably, focuses on death and the rituals of mourning and ends with Jane Austen’s own. If Jane’s death is mournful to contemplate, the trajectory of the book’s conclusion somewhat redresses the emotional balance. It focuses on Cassandra, whose financial situation—due to a combination of legacies, her sister’s royalties, investments, and frugality—grew ever more healthy as she grew older. The image of Cassandra as a “woman of substance” ends the book on a cheerful note—modulated only by the inescapable fact of Jane Austen’s untimely death and our image of what that un-lived future might have held.

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