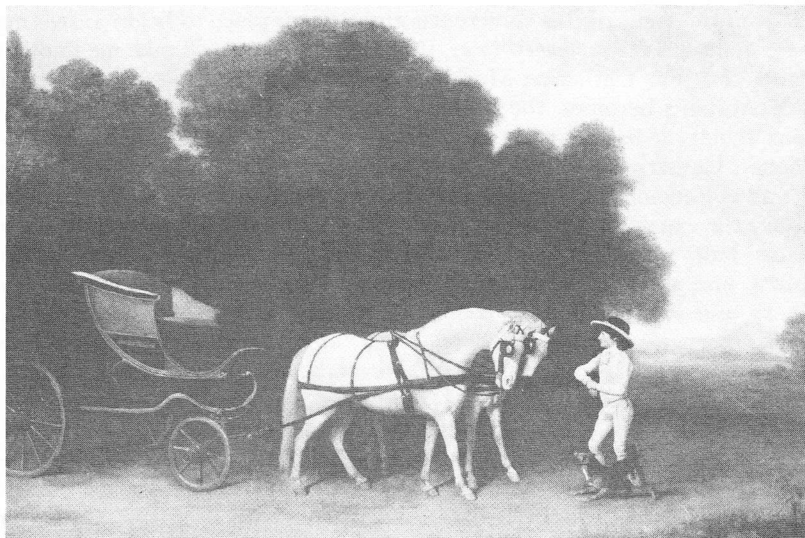
Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America – *Persuasions* #7, 1985
www.jasna.org ISSN 0821-0314



A Phaeton, Cream Ponies and a Stable Lad *by George Stubbs* c. 1780-85.

Janes Austen's Accommodations[1]

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Madam President and Madam Co-ordinator, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a distinct pleasure and privilege to address you today on Jane Austen's novels. For there seems to be at the present, as in Jane Austen's time, "a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist." How often have we heard the response, "Oh! it is only a novel!" And how often have we been tempted to give Jane Austen's own reply: "only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*NA*, pp. 37-38).[2]

My subject today is "Jane Austen's Accommodations." "Accommodation," in two connected senses of the word, takes us to central concerns in Jane Austen's life and fiction, and to a central issue in Jane Austen criticism. Accommodation, in the sense of a place to live, was a preoccupation of Jane Austen and of the heroines she wrote about. And accommodation, in the sense of the adaptation she made to her social and financial circumstances, is a recurring matter of debate among Jane Austen's interpreters. In what ways, to what extent, did Jane Austen adapt herself to her social world? How critical—or how approving—was she of the often imperfect society in which she had to find a home—an accommodation not only for her body but for her mind, her intelligence, her wit?

Given the focus of this conference, the obvious place to begin answering these questions is *Northanger Abbey*, though my subject will take me to other places also. For Catherine Morland, the youngest and most ingenuous of Jane Austen's heroines, the problem of finding appropriate accommodations is not, it seems, pressing. Introduced to gothic fiction by Isabella Thorpe, Catherine develops "a passion for Henry Tilney," and when in the second volume of the novel she is invited by General Tilney to Northanger Abbey she experiences "perfect bliss": "With all the chances against her of house, hall, place, park, court, and cottage, Northanger turned up an abbey, and she was to be its inhabitant." How strange that her friends, Henry and Eleanor Tilney, should be so blasé about their home, which must possess (as Catherine hopes) "long, damp passages,... narrow cells and ruined chapel... some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (p. 141).

Like the real Blaize Castle Catherine never gets to visit, however, Northanger is less mediaeval than might be expected. To Catherine's dismay, the abbey is the *dernier cri* in modern fashion and conveniences. Caring for "no furniture of a more modern date than the fifteenth century," Catherine finds "furniture in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste" (p. 162), a smoke-free Rumford fire-place, and a breakfast room with a set of Staffordshire china. Henry's late mother's room—far from revealing evidence of her untimely demise—has a Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly painted chairs. True, the kitchen is the "ancient kitchen of the convent," but even here General Tilney's "improving hand had not loitered... every modern invention to facilitate the labour of the cooks, had been adopted within this, their spacious theatre" (p. 183). Outside in the grounds, Catherine is shown a huge kitchen garden, countess walls, a "whole village of hot-houses," and much more. Northanger has pineapples in its plantations and French bread in its ovens. The general is conspicuously up-to-date, resembling the American-born inventor Count Rumford in his ingenuity, or Timon in Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* in the pride of his improvements. Surely there is more to Jane Austen's untypically detailed descriptions of house and grounds than the aim of deflating her romantic heroine's gothic illusions.[3]

General Tilney is, in fact, a modern rather than a gothic tyrant, a member of the wealthy gentry voraciously intent on extending his power and riches through arranging an advantageous matrimonial alliance between his second son and the rich heiress he believes Catherine to be. This explains his deference to Catherine at Northanger and later at Woodston parsonage, Henry's home. At Woodston, the general displays house and grounds to her as the prospective reward for her acceptance of his son. Woodston, too, is modern, but not as magnificently or as aggressively so as the abbey; it is "a new-built substantial stone house, with... semi-circular sweep and green gates" (p. 212). Disappointed at Catherine's seeming lack of enthusiasm, the general suggests a bow window—that most typical of Georgian improvements[4]—and, on hearing Catherine's delighted response to the view from the drawing room window,—a view of a "sweet little cottage" among apple trees—announces:

> "You like it—you approve of it as an object; it is enough. Henry, remember that Robinson is spoken to about it. The cottage remains." (p. 214)

Though she does not realize it, Catherine has prevented the destruction of the cottage—an "improvement" as heinous, perhaps, as John Dashwood's cutting down of the walnut trees at Norland in *Sense and Sensibiltiy*.

The general's solicitude toward Catherine vanishes, of course, when he discovers from John Thorpe that she is not the heiress Thorpe had earlier led him to believe but belongs instead (according to Thorpe's present appraisal) to "a necessitous family," "a forward, bragging, scheming race . . . seeking to better themselves by wealthy connexions" (p. 246). Returning in a fury from London, he has Catherine dismissed immediately from the abbey. Not even the hour of departure is left to her choice. She is forced to borrow money from Eleanor and, after a journey of seventy miles, unattended by a servant, she eventually returns home, "a heroine in a hack post-chaise" (p. 232).

Within the parody of the gothic novel, that is the obvious intention of *Northanger Abbey*, another drama is played out, the drama of an innocent girl of modest means, from a country parsonage, who finds herself in the midst of an aggressive and mercenary society. That there are alarms enough in this scenario is the hidden message of the novel. Jane Austen was in her twenty-fourth year when she first composed the novel in 1799. Within two years she would leave her own parsonage home in Hampshire for residence in Bath, but—despite the report of her fainting away on hearing from her mother of the intended move—she is likely to have known of her father's plans to retire, relinquish his livings to his eldest son James, and remove with his wife and two single daughters to another place, one appropriate to a reduced income, and one, moreover where Jane and Cassandra might improve their chances of marriage. What domestic destiny lay ahead? What were Jane Austen's own chances of "house, hall, place, park, court and cottage"?

That she should think of her future in terms of a spectrum of possible domestic establishments would be natural, given the normal expectations of the time and the particular character of her upbringing. On her mother's side she was distantly related to nobility, and there was even an abbey in the Leigh family, Stoneleigh Abbey. Jane Austen visited it in 1806 shortly after it was inherited by her mother's cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh; in 1806 it was quite different from her own fictional abbey, though Dr. Leigh would soon employ Humphry Repton to modernize its old-fashioned grounds—what Jane Austen though of these improvements, which removed walls, opened vistas, and altered the course of the River Avon, I should dearly love to know.[5]

Her father's forbears, stemming from Kentish clothiers, were less socially distinguished, but George Austen was well connected. A rich solicitor uncle, Francis Austen, who had been agent at Knole, purchased the living of Deane for him when it became vacant in 1773, and earlier in 1761 another rich kinsman, Thomas Knight of Godmersham in Kent, presented him to the living of Steventon. Thomas Knight's son (also named Thomas Knight) did more: he adopted the third Austen son, when Edward was in his teens, making him his heir; so that from her childhood Jane Austen was sister to the heir and eventual owner of a magnificent Palladian mansion in Kent and a less imposing but nevertheless substantial gentry estate—Chawton—in Hampshire. Like Mansfield Park, as appraised by Mary Crawford, Godmersham was "so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen's seats in the kindom" (*MP*, p. 48); engravings of W. Watts's views of Godmersham (dating from 1784-85) in

fact appear in Hasted's *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, published in 1799. It would be surprising if Jane Austen grew up without a sense of her family's consequence and her own entitlement.

True, her father was by no means rich during her childhood; but he was able to improve Steventon Rectory and make it into a roomy and comfortable house. Moreover he kept a carriage and was the acting squire, as it were, of Steventon. He had relations with territorial magnates in the district, such as Lord Portsmouth and Lord Dorchester, and more intimate links with such gentry families as the Harwoods of Deane and the Bigg Withers of Manydown. Jane Austen knew these families—and their houses—as she was growing up and knew, too, that children from the Steventon Rectory, given a little luck and sufficient will, would do well for themselves in the world—at least if they were male. Her eldest brother James took Holy Orders, succeeded his father at Steventon and, by 1808, with the aid of an allowance from his mother's rich brother, James Leigh Perrot, had a comfortable income of £1100 (with expectations of more to come from his uncle). Edward, as we have seen, became a great gentry landowner. Henry, her favourite brother, the most versatile and least dependable, became a banker whose bankruptcy in 1816 cost his brother Edward an heiress's fortune—£20,000—and his uncle Leigh Perrot £10,000. The younger brothers Francis and Charles pursued highly successful careers in the Royal Navy, both ending up as admirals.

Even such a brief mention of her brothers' careers reminds us that the Austens as a family were successful, figures of varying consequence in the church, the land and the naval profession. Aware of her lineage and connections, and proud of her brothers' accomplishments, Jane Austen had more than sufficient cause to feel she had a stake in her world. The origins of her fictional patriotism, expressed so unashamedly in the description of the "English verdure, English culture, English comfort" of Donwell Abbey in *Emma* (p. 360), were familial, deep and never, despite provocations, eradicated. Living through the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, which touched her family in various and dramatic ways, she had reason to be chauvinistic; a strain of cultural affirmation is genuinely present in her novels.

Yet unlike her brothers, Jane Austen did not achieve an establishment or a name for herself during her lifetime, and we may wonder whether she did not suffer from a sense of frustrated entitlement in consequence. As she was growing up, she occasionally visited great houses like Hurstbourne Park, the home of the third Earl of Portsmouth, who had been for a short time George Austen's pupil at Steventon; but much more usual and congenial were visits to Deane House, Ashe Park and Manydown. Though on a much smaller scale than Hurstbourne Park, or Hackwood, the seat of the Duke of Bolton near Basingstoke, these were substantial and commodious houses dear to Jane Austen's heart. "To sit in idleness over a good fire in a well-proportioned room is a luxurious sensation," she wrote to Cassandra in November 1800, after a visit to Ashe Park.[6] This was a year before she left for Bath. A year after the removal she returned to Steventon, and, while on a visit to Manydown, accepted a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg Wither, son and heir, and a man six years her junior. This action, the most precipitant of her life, was revoked the next morning, but can we doubt that it was the appeal of house and establishment in her beloved Hampshire

that prompted the acceptance, and the realization that there were certain accommodations she could not make to gain that end that prompted the change of mind? Jane Austen was almost twenty-seven when she rejected Bigg Wither's proposal in December 1802. At the same age Charlotte Lucas accepts the abominable Mr. Collins, a decision Elizabeth Bennet considers to lack principle and integrity (*PP*, pp. 135-36). Marriage throughout the novels is the most important accommodation of all, and we may be sure that, like her heroine in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen pondered long over "the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive" (*PP*, p. 153). When Elizabeth visits Charlotte at the Hunsford parsonage, she is surprised to discover how successfully Charlotte has accommodated herself to her fate, but while she gives Charlotte credit for arranging the rooms so as to be as little bothered by her odious husband as possible, she does not alter her view that marriage simply out of desire for an establishment is an unprincipled act.

Jane Austen's domestic destiny was not to be the mistress of Manydown Park, much less of a house like Hurstbourne Park. When the Austens left Hampshire in 1801, they found lodgings in Bath after a good deal of worry over the size of various rooms, the salubriousness of various houses, and the social status of various districts. In Bath they lived in Sydney Place and the less fashionable Green Park Buildings and then, after Mr. Austen's death, in smaller houses in Gay Street and Trim Street. In 1806, Mrs. Austen and her daughters shared a house with the Frank Austens in Castle Square, Southampton, and, in 1809, they accepted Edward's offer and took up residence in Chawton, in a house (not then called a cottage) that had recently been inhabited by the Chawton Manor steward. It stood at the junction of the main road from London to Winchester with the road to Gosport and doubtless needed the hornbeam hedges that Edward planted to screen out the traffic.

The combined incomes of the Austen women, a mere £210 a year on the father's death, was raised to £460 a year through annual grants from the brothers. It was a sum sufficient to provide a fairly comfortable life with a servant; but it made Cassandra and Jane dependent in many ways on their brothers' generosity. (We might recall here that the admittedly extravagant Isabella Thorpe considers £400 per annum "hardly enough to find one in the common necessaries of life" [*NA*, p. 135].) Living in the Chawton cottage—if I may anachronistically so call it—they were in more than one sense on the edge of Edward's estate, on the margin of polite society.

Jane Austen's destiny, then, was to be a spinster in a cottage, sharing a bedroom with her sister, and writing novels in the common sitting-room, where, warned by a creaking door, she could slip her writing under the blotting-book before visitors could see her at her creative work. Without a room of her own—without certainly the £500 a year that Virginia Woolf valued as a means of artistic freedom for women—she wrote about homes she would never be mistress of—Kellynch Hall, Mansfield Park, Sotherton Court, Pemberley, Donwell Abbey—and created heroines who, through good marriages, find comfortable domestic establishments. Three of them —Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price—find accommodation in parsonages, a destiny, I suspect, Jane Austen would have found congenial. Another three—Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse—become mistresses of estates varying from the modest to the

magnificent. To be mistress of Pemberley, with its park ten miles round and its income of £10,000 a year, she can fulfil her aunt Gardiner's dream of a trip around the park in "a low phaeton, with a nice little pair of ponies" (*PP*, p. 325). George Stubbs's painting, *Two Cream Ponies, a Phaeton and a Stable Lad* (ca. 1785), conveys a sense of the elegance of Elizabeth's married life.

The fate that Marianne Dashwood escapes in *Sense and Sensibility*—"of remaining... for ever with her mother, and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study" (*SS*, p. 378)—came to none of her heroines, then, but was reserved for herself, though of course her "study" was not that of a scholar but of a novelist. How did she accommodate herself to a life of disappointed hopes, to expectations of legacies that never arrived, to a status verging on that of distressed gentility?

The first and most important answer is that she wrote novels. If life would not accommodate her, she would accommodate life. Dispossessed socially, she possessed her world aesthetically. Without a comfortable income of her own, she commanded a precisely discriminated range of incomes in her fiction. As readers have long suspected and social historians recently confirmed, she had an exact knowledge of the financial scale: she knew the value of livings and the law of entails; she knew what fortune would capture the eldest son of a baronet or the younger son of an earl. She measured the ways in which money mattered, particularly in marriage—what Smollett in *Humphry Clinker* had termed "the holy banes of matter-money." Schooled by her experience in Bath, Godmersham and London, where through Henry and Eliza she came into contact with French emigré circles, she became a discriminating spectator of performances in public places, a keen observer of the nuances of social differences. In particular, she had an eye for those "positional goods" that were the signs of, or presumptive claims to, social status.[7]

She had, for example, an eye for a carriage. As early as 1798, when her father laid down his carriage, she knew the "disconvenience" of not having a conveyance to neighbouring balls (*Letters*, p. 29), and problems of travelling from place to place are frequently mentioned in the letters. In the instance of carriages, however, as of houses, dispossession led to possession in another—aesthetic—mode. The hero of *Memoirs of Mr. Clifford* (written before she was fifteen) travels to London in a Coach and Four, but he also possesses: "a Coach, a Chariot, a Chaise, a Landeau, a Landeaulet, a Phaeton, a Gig, a Whisky, an italian Chair, a Buggy a Curricle & a wheelbarrow" (*MW*, p. 43). Like Catherine Morland's list of houses, this is a list of discriminated social claims and possibilities. The list is not complete despite its length; it lacks Mrs. Elton's barouche-landau, for example, by merely referring to which that *arriviste* makes a social claim. But it names other vehicles that play roles in the fiction: General Tilney's "fashionable chaise-and-four," for example, in which he travels accompanied by liveried postilions and numerous outriders (*NA*, p. 156), or Lady Catherine's carriage, in which she travels in similar state to tell Elizabeth she cannot marry Darcy (*PP*, p. 351).

Carriages in the novels are not only the appendages of money and marriage but markers of social and moral worth. In this connection, it is worth recalling how fond Jane Austen was of the curricle—a fashionable two-wheeled vehicle drawn by a pair of horses. Darcy drives one when he

brings his sister to meet Elizabeth, and when Catherine Morland transfers from the general's chaise to Henry's curricle, on the way to Woodston, she is "as happy a being as ever existed" (*NA*, p. 156). John Thorpe covets a curricle, but has to make do with a gig, a vehicle drawn by one horse, appropriate to his income, social status and driving skills. Other characters who own gigs are the hard-up Sir Edward Denham in *Sanditon*, Mr. Collins, ever anxious to demean himself in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Admiral Croft in *Persuasion*, where, however, the gig signifies not modest means (he is rich enough to rent Kellynch Hall) but his freedom from social vanity and his close partnership with his wife. In the same novel, Anne Elliot ends up "mistress of a very pretty landaulette" (*P*, p. 250). When she wrote *Persuasion*, by contrast, Jane Austen was the mistress of a donkey and cart (*Letters*, pp. 475-76, 485).

Deprived in her life of positional goods in the shape of houses and carriages, how did Jane Austen respond to her society? With regulated hatred and secret irony as her subversive critics have argued? With a more or less disguised opposition to the systems of primogeniture and patriarchal rule that excluded her from significant participation, as recent feminist critics have proposed? That she was a critic—and often an acerbic critic—of aspects of her social world no one is likely to deny. And that her irony and criticism often stem from a sense of the social powerlessness of single women without fortunes, this also is true. We cannot read her unfinished work, *The Watsons* (ca. 1804-05), without seeing how obsessively it focuses on the plight of distressed gentlefolk and on the predicament of the portionless single woman. "I think I could like any good humoured Man with a comfortable Income," Elizabeth Watson admits, while lamenting that "my Father cannot provide for us, & it is very bad to grow old & be poor & laughed at" (*MW*, pp. 318, 317). Even in the juvenilia, written before the fact of Jane Austen's social dispossession, bitterness is present. The third letter of "A Collection of Letters," for example, is entitled "From A young Lady in distress'd Circumstances to her friend." Without a conveyance to a ball, the heroine is forced to endure the aggressive interrogation of Lady Williams, as she is driven in the latter's carriage; like Lady Catherine's questions to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Greville's are intended to establish and maintain the social inferiority of the heroine.

Or consider the following dialogue in "The Three Sisters," written when Jane Austen was seventeen:

> "Yet how can I hope that my Sister may accept a Man who cannot make her happy."
>
> "*He* cannot it is true but his Fortune, his Name, his House, his Carriage will... "(*MW*, p. 61)

"He" is Mr. Watts, and his income of £3000 a year is, as one of the sisters says, "but six times as much as my Mother's income" (p. 62)—or, we can add, but five times as much as George Austen's probable income at the time of the story.

No one can deny, reading the minor works, that Jane Austen detested the ways in which young women were made commodities in a marriage market. Whether the minor works measure the depth of her alienation with her culture is, however, another matter.[8] Jane Austen was not, in my view, disaffected with her society in the way that Mary Wollstonecraft, her near

contemporary, was. True, she shared Wollstonecraft's distaste for a society that prized "accomplishments" in young women and, like Wollstonecraft, deplored men's preference for female "refinement" over intelligence and understanding. *Northanger Abbey* humorously reveals this again and again—"A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can" (p. 111). But unlike Wollstonecraft, she had no structural changes to propose in her society; there is nothing in Jane Austen, for example, that comes close to chapter 12 of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which advocates a progressive and co-educational system of national schools. Not is this merely the difference between novelist and polemical writer; Jane Austen could find accommodations for her heroines in existing structures; Mary Wollstonecraft could not. Accommodations were not always easy to find, as the marginal lives of Jane Fairfax in *Emma* and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion* show; but though she occasionally resembles Wollstonecraft in her awareness of women's "enslavement," she shows no signs of advocating alternative roles for women (e.g., those of physicians or businesswomen), as Wollstonecraft does in chapter 9 of *Rights of Woman*. Jane Austen's criticism was not politically progressivist, as Wollstonecraft's was. Family background is perhaps a relevant consideration here. Unlike Wollstonecraft, who suffered in childhood and youth from the brutal behaviour of a drunken father, Jane Austen was, as far as we can gather, well-treated by her father and brothers. Thus she had far less cause to attack patriarchal rule and was able, in fact, to conceive of a rural culture adequate to the demands the individual woman might make on it.[9]

The kind of ideal rural culture she valued is displayed though her descriptions of estates like Donwell Abbey and Delaford. Mr. Knightley's Donwell Abbey is unfashionably "low and sheltered"; the house is "rambling and irregular"; the gardens stretch down to "meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect had scarcely a sight"; there is an "abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up" (*E*, p. 358). All the notations here signify traditional values. As Emma observes the scene, she views an expression of the traditional culture she will accept and invigorate when she marries Knightley. As his name implies, Knightley's values are those of an older "moral" economy; such values are endorsed by his author, who, conscious of her ancestry and her links to an estate like Stoneleigh Abbey, held traditional ideas of social community.

Delaford, the married home of both Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, is another example of an ideal community. As Mrs. Jennings reports:

> Delaford is... a nice old fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences; quite shut in with great garden walls that are covered with the best fruit-trees in the country; and such a mulberry tree in one corner!... Then, there is a dove-cote, some delightful stewponds, and a very pretty canal... it is close to the church... A butcher hard by in the village, and the parsonage-house within a stone's throw. To my fancy, a thousand times prettier than Barton Park, where they are forced to send three miles for their meat. (pp. 196-97)

Through the garrulity of Mrs. Jennings' description we may recognize certain traditional codes of description. Apparently lost in the flow of the discourse, these codes imply values of continuity, organic social growth, and the interdependence of church and land. One notation—the contrast

between Delaford and the richer Barton Park—is as old as Martial's epigrams.[10] The Middletons at Barton Park, who send out for their food, join a long line of characters in literary history who have forsaken the ideal of the self-sufficient estate.

Along with such other places as Allenham, Sotherton Court, Thornton Lacey and the mansion house at Uppercross, Delaford has escaped the attention of professional improvers like Capability Brown and Humphry Repton. Such places are old-fashioned, and while being old-fashioned is not invariably a virtue—Sotherton Court obviously needs "modern dress," if not of the kind that Henry Crawford proposes—an old-fasioned estate usually signifies value in her fiction. By the same measure, extravagantly improved houses and estates like Lady Catherine's Rosings, or John Dashwood's Norland, or General Tilney's Northanger Abbey are negatively viewed as posing threats to a cultural heritage. I do not mean to sound sentimental about this. Jane Austen's values, like those of other conservative writers, are class-based, and, like the ideal communities she envisioned, ultimately dependent on money. Her brother Edward undoubtedly benefited from the agrarian capitalist economy in which he participated; and, in any case, the ideal of a moral economy innocent of financial manipulation should be viewed with suspicion, as Raymond Williams and others have argued.[11]

The point is not to elevate Jane Austen's criticism of economic aggression and her praise of older "tory" ways into a set of universal values, but simply to suggest that she could, and did, genuinely conceive of communities worthy of accommodating her heroines. Only one of her heroines—Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*—is not granted a home in the country; as her status-obsessed sister Mary observes with satisfaction, Anne has "no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family" (*P*, p. 250); and among the interesting new directions of Jane Austen's last novel is its search for accommodations outside of familiar social contexts. Useful as it would be to pursue the theme of accommodations in *Persuasion*, however—by following Anne Elliot into Mrs. Smith's dismal accommodations in Westgate Buildings, for example, or by visiting Captain Harville's small rooms near the Cobb in Lyme—I must resist the temptation and return in conclusion to *Northanger Abbey*, where we left our heroine, you will recall, back home in Fullerton, discontented, and talking rather too often for her mother's peace of mind about the French bread at Northanger.

Jane Austen had a problem with her ending. In view of the enormity of the general's action in expelling Catherine from the abbey, how could she close the breach that had opened? How could she give her heroine accommodations? How could her heroine accommodate herself to the violent world she had encountered? Catherine hardly seems to possess the resources which allow Elizabeth Bennet to resist the bullying of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, or Marianne Dashwood to stand up to the arrogance of Mrs. Ferrars. Jane Austen could of course have resolved her plot by simply resorting to the romantic solution of allowing love to conquer all obstacles. But this was never her way. She made use of the plot that Samuel Richardson had bequeathed to the English novel, and her heroines are Pamela's daughters in the sense that they all marry appropriately and well, implying in the process that the "virtues" of integrity and intelligence will be "rewarded" with fitting domestic establishments. But she was always aware

of how easily plot may become the accomplice of wishful thinking, and she refused to pass fantasy off as truth. So it is that she "lays bare" the mechanism of her denouement in *Northanger Abbey*. "What probable circumstances could work upon a temper like the General's?" is the question of the final chapter. Henry has followed Catherine to Fullerton, proposed to her and been accepted, but the general's formidable objections remain to be overcome, and if they are not overcome there will be no wedding. Without the general's consent, the Morland parents will not give their approval; and in Jane Austen's fictional world Henry and Catherine do not have the romantic option of eloping in his curricle.

At this point the narrator concedes, tongue in cheek, that the anxiety her characters feel "can hardly extend . . . to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity" (p. 250). The circumstance that removes the General's objections is the advantageous marriage of Eleanor Tilney to a gentleman, whose address to her had previously been prevented —by "inferiority of situation." His "unexpected accession of title and fortune" removed *that* problem, but the narrator can say little else—since the rules of composition forbid the late introduction of characters—except that "this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing-bills . . . by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures" (p. 251). By such parodic means—worthy of Cervantes—Jane Austen brings the pleasure principle into line with the reality principle. If it requires such a concatenation of chance events to bring about the marriage of hero and heroine, then we are in the realm of romance still, and should assess the marriage of Henry and Catherine accordingly. Otherwise, if as readers we accede to the probability of their marriage, we are no better than Catherine, when, as a reader of gothic fiction, she accedes to the probability that the general has murdered his wife—or, at least, has her hidden away in some prison. More than Catherine's "gothic" illusions are disciplined in *Northanger Abbey*; the reader's fantasies of the inevitability of happy endings must also be "desublimated."[12]

Yet this is to put it a little too strongly. Despite its subversion of romantic novel endings, Jane Austen's conclusion allows to romantic "desire"—her own as well as her readers'—a certain measure of triumph. She does this paradoxically by showing that Henry's marriage to Catherine rests in the end on a realistic basis; the general learns, contrary to the misinformation of John Thorpe, that the Morlands are "in no sense of the word . . . necessitous or poor," that Catherine will have a fortune of £3000, and, moreover, that the Fullerton estate is entirely at the disposal of the childless Mr. Allen and therefore "open to every greedy speculation" (pp. 251-52). Thus, we might say, while Catherine may not be entitled to be mistress of Northanger Abbey, her fortune and prospects do give her a claim on the Woodston parsonage. And if, as an anti-heroine, she does not in the end merit "the dignity of a countess, with a long train of noble relations in their several phaetons" (p. 232), then neither need she settle for the hack post-chaise that returned her to Fullerton. Even while bringing Catherine's expectations down to their proper architectural size, Jane Austen claimed for her heroine what Othello claimed for Desdemona in Shakespeare's play:

> Due reference of place and exhibition
> With such accommodation and besort
> As levels with her breeding. (I, iii, 237-39)

She could do that in *Northanger Abbey*; in some of her later fiction she was more aware—to allude to Shakespeare again—of the "thing itself," the possibility of the "unaccommodated" woman, reduced like Elizabeth Watson, or Miss Bates, or Mrs. Smith, to bare, penurious, single existence.

NOTES

[1] This talk is a substantially revised and shortened version of a chapter contributed to *The First English Novelists*, ed. J. M. Armistead (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 225-67.

[2] All citations are taken from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vol. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-34), or from *The Works of Jane Austen*, Vol. VI, *Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman, rev. B. C. Southam (London: Oxford University Press, 1954, rev. 1969).

[3] See Nikolaus Pevsner, "The Architectural Setting of Jane Austen's Novels," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 31 (1968), 408-09; B. C. Southam, "*Sanditon*: the Seventh Novel," in *Jane Austen's Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 12-16; Christopher Kent, "'Real Solemn History' and Social History," in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, (1981), pp. 98-99.

[4] Pevsner, p. 410.

[5] For further consideration of this question see Mavis Batey, "Jane Austen at Stoneleigh Abbey," *Country Life*, 160, 30 December 1976, pp. 1974-75, and Alistair M. Duckworth, "Improvements," in *The Jane Austen Handbook*, ed. J. David Grey *et al.* (New York: Scribner's, 1985).

[6] *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 84.

[7] David Spring, "Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), p. 61.

[8] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 117.

[9] For another view of Jane Austen in relation to Mary Wollstonecraft, see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983).

[10] See, e.g., *Epigram* 3.58, "Baiana nostri villa, Basse, Faustini."

[11] *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For a consideration of agricultural improvements associated with agarian capitalism at Jane Austen's time, see David Spring, *op. cit.* And for an argument that farm rents rose generally in the period, on the estates of improvers and traditionalists alike, see Terry Lovell, "Jane Austen and Gentry Society," in *Literature, Society and the Sociology of Literature*, ed. Francis Barker *et al.* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1977), p. 120.

[12] For an interesting analysis of Jane Austen's denouements, see Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), pp. 199-235; and for a discussion of "desublimation" in *Northanger Abbey*, see George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61-80.