

## Jane Austen: Liberal Tory

### Jane Austen and the State of the Nation

By Sheryl Craig.

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Review by Nora Nachumi.

What were Jane Austen's political sympathies? Was she conservative or liberal, a Whig or a Tory? In *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation*, Sheryl Craig reminds us to be careful of either/or oppositions. Like Nancy Armstrong, Craig reads Austen as a "liberal Tory" whose work reflects her concern for the poor and the economic decline of her nation. Unfortunately, she argues, the "political messages that would have been obvious to Austen's original readers" have become "obscure, even undetectable, to readers in the twenty-first century." Craig's primary task is to make these concerns visible to readers today. In doing so, she makes a good case for the nature of Austen's political sympathies and opens up new ways of reading the novels.

Craig first establishes the political context in which the novels were written. Tories spoke "for the agricultural interest of the landed gentry" while Whigs represented the "'interests of the aristocracy'" and "those who lived . . . on investments or by trade." Tories defended the social order while Whigs supported "liberal ideals." However, Craig notes, considerable differences existed *within* each political party. Like the rest of the party, liberal Tories believed that Britain's economy was basically sound; yet they also acknowledged "the country's serious financial problems" and "favored change." Led by William Pitt the Younger, Britain's Prime Minister, liberal Tories and moderate Whigs often supported the same propositions in opposition to the more extreme factions in both of their parties. Craig blames this "political ambiguity" for misleading

critics like Edward Neill to conclude that Austen harbored Whig sympathies. On the contrary, she argues, Austen's books "consistently promote[s] a liberal Tory . . . agenda" regarding national politics and the economy.

The subsequent discussion proceeds in chronological order. Each work is read in the context of a contemporary issue or debate. Along the way, Craig notes a difference between work written before and after Pitt's death in 1806. Before 1806, she argues, Austen advocates "political action at the national level to care for the poor and stabilize the economy." In the later novels, Craig argues, Austen appears to have lost faith in the national government. In the novels that follow *Mansfield Park*—which Craig reads as unremittingly bleak—Austen suggests that "local government and individuals working together in their parish communities" are "the only hope of achieving economic stability and adequate provision for the poor."

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the variety of Craig's evidence. To illustrate Austen's strategic use of location in *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Craig includes information about the poor rates and the rate of enclosure in the counties where Austen locates her protagonists. "The placement of admirable characters in the southwest of England," she concludes, endorses the "generous response to poverty that William Pitt proposed and which the landowners in Sir John Middleton's Devonshire and Colonel Brandon's Dorset had already voluntarily adopted." To buttress her case for Darcy's benevolence, she explains that a "laborer in Derbyshire could earn three times the daily wage of a laborer in southern England." We also learn about Austen's use of particular names (e.g. Mansfield and Hawkins), voting rights in the different types of boroughs, specific policies proposed by Pitt's government and its opponents, Adam Smith's theories in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* and the amount the captain of a slave ship could realize

in one successful voyage.

*Jane Austen and the State of the Nation* succeeds in opening up new ways of reading the novels. *Sense and*

*Sensibility*, for example, is a much cheerier story when one understands why Edward Ferrars' refusal to go into politics is "truly heroic." *Emma* too seems a sunnier novel—or, at the very least, less claustrophobic—when one understands that "the communal consciousness" formed by the characters allows them to "devalue money and to value people instead." Conversely the danger posed by selfish, financially irresponsible characters like John Willoughby and Sir Walter Elliot becomes far more serious if one recognizes their responsibilities as Members of Parliament. Indeed, Craig reminds us, *Persuasion* is set in the months leading up to the Waterloo Crash.

*Jane Austen and the State of the Nation* does not directly address arguments that contradict its own. As a result the book will leave some of its readers with questions. For example, Craig argues that Catherine Moreland's fears are revealed to be groundless. Claudia Johnson asserts otherwise. Can these views be reconciled? *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation* is an interesting, persuasive, provocative book that leaves open the door for the debate to continue.

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