

Miniatures
and MORALS

the Christian novels of *Jane Austen*

Peter J. LEITHART

Peter J. Leithart, *Miniatures and Morals: The Christian Novels of Jane Austen*
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to Emma.

Who truly “unites some of the best
blessings of existence”

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acknowledgments

I fell in love with Jane Austen — as a writer, I mean — nearly a decade ago when I read through *Pride and Prejudice* to my family. As I read after dinner week by week, my audience dwindled, as the children found various excuses to leave the table and never made good on their promises to return. In the end, I think only Woelke, my oldest, heard me out to the very end, no doubt eager even in that preteen stage of life to find out if Elizabeth and Darcy would end up together. I didn't mind in the least. Even if I had been left at the table all by myself, I would have continued reading aloud, chuckling over Mr. Bennet and his "lady," scoffing at Mr. Collins, and enjoying Elizabeth Bennet's fine wit, which, I imagined, perfectly matched her sparkling eyes. By the time I closed the book, I was not quite a Janeite (evidence: I've no idea how to play whist). I was, however, definitely a settled fan.

My delight in Austen's writing has not diminished over the years since, and my appreciation of her skill and wisdom has only increased, largely due to opportunities to lecture on Austen in various settings. I teach on *Pride and Prejudice* in my literature survey at New St. Andrews College, and am faced every year with the daunting prospect of trying to provide illumination to students — mostly female — who know Austen far better than I. Daunting, but invaluable, since I have learned far more than I realize about Austen from them.

Several years ago, I received even more help by offering an elective course on Austen, in which we (that is, about a dozen women,

one male student, a male auditor, and I) worked through all of Austen's finished works. That course particularly gave me a chance to begin developing the interpretations of the novels I offer in this volume.

During the summer of 2001, I was invited to deliver several talks on literature at the Christian Worldview Student Conference in Newport News, Virginia. Thanks to Pastors Byron Snapp and Pete Hurst for inviting me, and to the students, who met all of the speakers with an enthusiasm that, to me at least, was just shy of frightening. It was there that I first attempted, without much success, to lead students in the chant, "Real Men Read Austen." Even enthusiastic students have their limits. I'm still hopeful the chant will catch on.

More recently, Dean Roy Atwood allowed me to deliver a lecture on Mansfield Park at a New St. Andrews disputatio, and almost convinced Doug Wilson to read the book. I included a lecture on Emma during a week-long survey of Western literature at the 2002 New St. Andrews summer school program, and owe thanks to all those who attended that class, which I remember with much affection.

Finally, thanks to Doug Jones for his interest in this project, and for the continuing support of Canon Press for my various books. Jared Miller, who has helped to edit several of my books, also deserves thanks for smoothing out the manuscript and making this a better book than it would have been.

Miniatures and Morals is dedicated to my second daughter, Emma, who is not named for Emma Woodhouse. In fact, she is nothing like Emma Woodhouse. She would not like Mrs. Elton any more than Emma Woodhouse does, but she would not make fun of her, and my Emma would never, ever say a nasty word to a Miss Bates or have to endure a stinging rebuke from Mr. Knightley. If there is an Austen character she resembles, it is Anne Elliot, or perhaps Fanny Price — quiet and slightly shy, compassionate, useful.

Emma is too young to remember my reading *Pride and Prejudice* to the family and has not yet begun to read Austen herself. But I

trust that, in time, she will find as much delight and instruction in Austen as her father has, and that, reading about her namesake, she will learn compassion, charity, and the discernment to distinguish between a Frank Churchill and a George Knightley.

Peniel Hall
Trinity Season, 2003

Chapter 1

Real Men Read Austen

If I had the opportunity to have dinner with a dozen of the greatest British and American writers, I would want the seat next to Jane Austen. Dickens would be too busy jumping up from the table making toasts or serving wine to engage in any real conversation, and I suspect Shakespeare would be much the same (actors always are). Faulkner would be drunk, and Joyce too. Jane—we'd all call her Jane—would not be a wallflower, but she would spend much of her time observing, and another proportion of her time whispering her observations with sometimes mordant sarcasm. Others at the table might *know* more, but Austen would be far and away the most *intelligent* among them.

And the funniest—Dickens' humor would be cartoonish and he would spend the evening doing wildly exaggerated impersonations; Shakespeare's funniest moments would be tinged with slapstick farce, and he would try to one-up Dickens with snippets of Falstaff and a comic Hamlet (actors always do). At a dinner party, though, where wit and irony rather than pratfalls were the source for humor, Jane would excel.

Jane Austen has never been more popular. Several years ago, James Wood wrote a piece in *The New Republic* that was summarized on the cover as "Austen Rules." And indeed she does: her books continue to be widely read; in recent years, several have been made into popular films of varying degrees of faithfulness to the originals; and even the films that bear the titles of the novels do

not represent the extent of her influence on movies. *Clueless* is a California-based remake of *Emma*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* barely conceals its plagiarism of *Pride and Prejudice*. Whit Stillman's trilogy of *Metropolitan*, *Last Days of Disco*, and *Barcelona* are less obviously drawn from Austen, but all have an Austen-like interest in class and manners, and the first is a modernized *Mansfield Park* with a "truth-telling" game filling the role of the theatrical production in the novel.

Despite her popularity, Austen is often misunderstood—especially by men. When I told friends I was working on a book on Austen, more than one asked, "Why?" and one did not believe me at first. (Note well: no women asked this question.) For many Austen is all tea parties and balls and bonnets, hoop skirts and sentimentality, and her popularity is merely a sign of the craven nostalgia that characterizes much of our early twenty-first century culture, the absurd wish for the simplicity of yesteryear.

Admittedly, there appears to be some ground for this assessment of Austen. Though living through a period that witnessed the birth of an independent United States, the French Revolution and the Terror, the Napoleonic wars and the rise of revolutionary romanticism, the evangelical revivals and the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, she focuses on a few middling gentry families in rural England. Touches of the wider world sometimes impinge on Austen's peaceful outposts—Wickham, a soldier, plays a prominent role in *Pride and Prejudice*, there are passing references to the British colonies and the slave trade in *Mansfield Park*, and the British navy's preservation of England is duly noted in *Persuasion*. For the most part, her characters go about their farming and their business, their follies and their romances, their dances and their games of backgammon and whist, as if nothing has changed. Soldiers and sailors, when they appear, are always on leave.

Well-read as she and her family were, it is impossible that Austen was ignorant of the transformations taking place around her. She read poetry and novels, including those from the romantic period, and she knew the literature of her time well enough to parody it. We know too that her family was directly affected by a number

of these events. Two of her brothers fought Napoleon as members of the British navy. Philadelphia Austen, Jane's aunt, had a daughter named Eliza who married a Frenchman, Jean Capot, Comte de Feuillide. The unfortunate Capot was guillotined during the terror, and his widow Eliza later married Jane's brother Henry to become Jane's sister-in-law. Her favorite brother, Henry, was a clergyman of evangelical stripe, and several letters show that Jane herself knew something of evangelicalism (though she did not like it much). Jane herself toyed with the idea of writing a biography of Napoleon.

How, then, does one account for the almost total absence of the contemporary world in her novels? When this question is raised, many attempt to explain Austen as a purveyor of nostalgia: with her world in upheaval, with everything turning upside down, she retreated into a bunker to fight a rearguard action against the spirit of the age and to offer quaint glimpses of a simpler, happier, saner time and place. Like Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*, she found change so disagreeable that she chose to pretend it had not happened.

Though Austen's twentieth-century readers (and, even more, viewers) may feel a twinge for a lost world, Austen herself betrays no such sentiment. It is difficult to imagine a less nostalgic writer than Austen; she was too sharp-witted, too much the satirist of manners, and too ironic for that. Her world amused her, but she was keenly aware of the pettiness of many of its inhabitants and she did not shrink from showing their true colors. If you want to get a sense of Austen's *unsentimentality*, you can do this experiment: read *any* Dickens novel (actually, a few pages or chapters would do), then read *any* Austen novel. Ask yourself which is more sentimental. The answer will be obvious.

More credibly, it has been suggested that Austen consciously chose to limit the scope of her concerns for artistic reasons. Charlotte Brontë, though no great admirer of Austen's work, still displayed considerable insight into the kind of writer Austen was. Of *Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë wrote that it was "An accurate daguerreotype portrait of a commonplace face. A carefully fenced,

highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers, but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny neck.” After reading *Emma*, Brontë wrote, “She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting.”

“Miniature delicacy” captures an important aspect of Austen. But it must be seen as a deliberate limitation, as some of her letters show. Her niece Anna sent her a manuscript of a book she was writing asking for comments, and in a famous reply, Austen writes: “You are now collecting your people delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life. Three or four families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on.” In another letter, she advises Anna to stick with things she knows: “we think you [i.e., Anna’s characters] had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations.” When Rev. James Stanier Clarke wrote on behalf of the Prince Regent to thank Austen for a copy of *Emma*, which had been dedicated to the Prince Regent, Clarke suggested that Austen try to write a romance. Austen insisted she would continue to write “such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in.” She continued:

I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem—I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my life, and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter. No, I must keep to my own style and my own way; and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.

She is being playful here, but expressing, in her playfulness, a clear consciousness of what she can and cannot do. Having never boarded a slaving ship, Austen refused to attempt writing about one; having never visited the colonies, Austen knew she could

not accurately depict their manners; having never experienced epic events, she refused to write an epic; but, having spent much of her life in small country towns, she could write about small country towns with insight. More than a few writers could learn from Austen's humility.

This "miniaturism" is manifest in a number of ways. First, she limits herself with regard to characters. Instead of peopling her books with a cast of thousands, as Dickens would later do, she focuses her entire attention on a small group of characters—on three or four families. For the most part, moreover, all her main characters are from a single sector of English society, the middle gentry classes. Members of the higher nobility sometimes appear, but they are almost never central characters and are often held up for ridicule. *Mansfield Park* depicts life in a noble house, but the central character is Fanny Price, a poor cousin who is living with the Bertrams. The few members of lower classes who appear are also on the margins. In *Emma* Harriet Smith is in love with a farmer, Robert Martin, but though he is the focus of considerable attention, we never hear him speak and he appears mainly in reported conversations of Harriet.

Austen also limits her novels with regard to action and setting. Several years ago, I read a few chapters of a book in the Jane Austen, Detective series, a mystery series in which Austen herself plays the sleuth. I was intrigued by the series for two reasons: I believe that Austen, with her extraordinary control of point of view and information, would have written wonderful detective fiction, and I had been told that the novels were written in the same style as Austen's own. Before the first chapter was done, however, Austen's carriage had turned over in a ditch, and she had fallen headlong with her skirts falling down over her head. I put the book aside, as Austen would say, in disgust, and have made a deliberate effort to forget the author. Whatever the virtues of Jane Austen, Detective, the book had little in common with Austen's fiction. Overtaken carriages, not to mention overturned heroines, have no place in Austen's world.

In Austen's own novels, it is often said, nothing happens. That is true if one expects carriages to overturn, car chases, or explosions. There is remarkably little violence or vigorous action in Austen's novels. At worst, a Marianne Dashwood falls and sprains her ankle on a hill and later catches a bad cold, or a Louisa Musgrove falls off a wall and receives a nasty bump on the head. One critic said that the most violent thing that happens in *Pride and Prejudice* occurs when Elizabeth jumps over a stile on the way to visit her sick sister. Colonel Brandon and Willoughby fight a duel (neither is wounded), but it is not shown and it is spoken of so cryptically and briefly that readers can easily miss it. Nobody, so far as I can recall, ever *bleeds* in an Austen novel. The settings of Austen's novels are mainly domestic and social, and men never, ever appear except in the company of women. It is definitely a woman's world. Again, the limitation is deliberate; having never entered a smoking room to discuss the day's hunt, Austen does not attempt to depict a fictional smoking room.

This is truly a limitation. Life does include moments of violence and physical peril, and their absence in Austen is one of the main things that makes the novels unappealing to men. Strikingly, too, though her novels are all romances, sex is quite absent and in many respects so is the body. One scholar wrote a monograph on the body in Austen, emphasizing Austen's frequent references to the "fine figures" of both men and women and other references to body parts; but "figure" is a geometric not an anatomical term and seems to reduce the person to a silhouette. Austen's characters have "eyes" and "figures" and sometimes "teeth," but we rarely get an image of a whole body. In terms of personality, Austen's characters are psychologically quite round, but physically they are flat. Novels without sex, violence, and bodies have a feeling of abstraction, something, perhaps, like Auden's "a million eyes, a million boots in line."

Still, I insist that "real men read Austen" and can read her with interest and profit. Austen, after all, created some very striking male characters. Some of her heroes are more than a little effeminate; Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* is painfully silent

in much of the book, though that is in part due to a depression caused by his secret engagement to the manipulative Lucy Steele, which is plenty to take the pluck out of any man. Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* knows more about fabrics than most men have cause to know. Austen's other heroes, however, are strong and forceful personalities, and definitely not effeminate. All her great heroes—Darcy, Wentworth, Edmund Bertram, Knightley—are men who hold positions of authority and use those positions for good. Each of them is a Christlike lover who sacrifices, often at some cost to his reputation, to win his bride. They are servant-heroes, not macho-heroes. For Austen, machismo is just Spanish for “bluster” and is the mark of villainy.

Even without considering her strong male characters, Austen's novels are highly instructive for men. The mere fact that her novels give men an opportunity to see romance through the eyes of an uncommonly perceptive woman should be enough to recommend them. Even if we men do not want to see courtship through a woman's eyes, who can say we do not need to? She has a strong sense of a man's role in courtship and his responsibility for the course that a courtship takes. More than one male character in her novels proves himself a scoundrel by playing with the affections of a woman. Austen's first rule of courtship is one I have frequently repeated to my sons: Men are responsible not only for behaving honorably toward women but also for the woman's response; if a man does not intend to enter a serious relationship, he has no business giving a woman special attention or encouraging her to attach herself to him. Austen sees clearly that men who play with a woman's affections are fundamentally egotistical. They want the admiration and attention of women without promising anything or making any commitment. Few lessons of courtship are more needed in our own day.

In fact, even the apparent lack of incident in Austen's novels is part of their particular strength. The events of an Austen novel are the kinds of incidents that most people are involved in most days and weeks and months of their lives. Nothing happens in Austen—nothing but marriages, engagements entered into and

broken, scandals exposed, evenings spent in conversation at the card table or around the fire, secrets kept and revealed, promises made and kept or broken. If “nothing happens” in Austen, it is because “nothing happens” most of the time. Yet, precisely because of this limitation, because so little seems to happen, every nuance and contour of what *does* happen takes on considerable importance. We begin to realize that men can be cad without kidnaping women and confining them in dark towers, and women can be vicious without poisoning their rivals. Men can be cad just by being male (John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* is the prime illustration), and women can kill as effectively with words as with arsenic. If we read Austen sensitively and begin to see things through her eyes, we begin to realize that much is happening in our lives even, or especially, at those frequent moments when “nothing is happening.” If this is a “feminine” vision of the world, it is one that men would do well to pay attention to. For it is not good that we should be alone.

Austen’s style is consistent with her limitation of character, setting, and plot. She is a miniaturist in style, in that she does more with less than any other writer in English. There is a precision and lack of ornamentation in her prose that I suspect owes much to the Bible and the Prayer Book. This makes her simply the best prose stylist, and one of the most innovative, in English literature (Shakespeare is better, but wrote mostly poetry). After reading Austen, every other writer’s style seems bloated, even—dare I blaspheme—as elegant a stylist as C.S. Lewis. Several examples will help to make the point.

One dimension of this economy is that she pays her readers the compliment of not spelling out everything explicitly. She expects her readers to be intelligent enough to draw conclusions from the information she gives. Toward the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine de Bourgh shows up at Longbourn in an attempt to pressure Elizabeth Bennet to give up all hopes of marrying Darcy. During this remarkably spirited exchange, Lady Catherine reveals that she received a report about the engagement “two days ago.” On the preceding page, in a conversation with Mrs. Bennet, she said

that she had left the Collinses well “the night before last.” In this case, the conclusion is drawn later by Elizabeth when she realizes that Lady Catherine had heard the rumor of Darcy’s impending engagement from the Collinses. But we were given all the facts we needed from Lady Catherine herself, and we as well as Elizabeth could have put two and two together. Similarly, at several points in *Emma*, Miss Bates provides crucial information about Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, but we need to pay careful attention to her rambling speeches to get the point. At the end of *Emma*, Mrs. Elton complains about the lack of elegance at Emma’s wedding, but the narrator subtly informs us that she was not in fact present by saying that she drew her conclusions “from the particulars detailed by her husband.”

Austen also frequently leaves much of a setting and even characters to the imagination. Writing to Anna, she offered this advice: “You describe a sweet place, but your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked. You give too many particulars of right hand and left.” Austen often creates the illusion of a scene with only a few strokes, a few props, like a caricaturist who can capture a face with a few lines. On Knightley’s first visit to Hartfield at the beginning of *Emma*, nothing in the room is mentioned besides a backgammon table, a fire, and a visitor. There is no description of Knightley’s physical appearance, or of the room, and even some of the “props” used to set the scene are noted by the characters rather than by the narrator. Other writers, like Charlotte Brontë, cannot bear to introduce a character without a photographic description.

John Reed was a schoolboy of fourteen years old . . . large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious, and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. (*Jane Eyre*, chap.1)

A snug, small room; a round table by a cheerful fire; an armchair high-backed and old-fashioned, wherein sat the neatest imaginable elderly lady, in widow’s cap, black silk gown and snowy muslin

apron; exactly like what I had fancied Mrs. Fairfax only less stately and milder looking. She was occupied in knitting; a large cat sat demurely at her feet; nothing in short was wanting to complete the beau-ideal of domestic comfort. (*Jane Eyre*, chap. 11)

One of the reasons Austen avoids this kind of detail is that it so often slips into tired clichés (like “tired cliché,” for example). If there is a fire, then by all means it must be “cheerful”; and I daresay that every fourteen-year-old boy who has ever appeared in any novel is either “large” or “small” for his age (whatever happened to all the average-sized fictional fourteen-year-old boys?). Yet Austen’s economy does not make her characters any less vivid and alive. Most readers of *Pride and Prejudice* come away feeling they know Elizabeth and Darcy, though we know very little about their appearance—height, weight, eye and hair color, stoutness of limbs and eating habits are left entirely to the imagination. As noted above, the lack of bodiliness is a problem, but Austen nearly makes up for it with psychological richness.

Austen not only limits the number of characters but creates them with an economy that borders on the miraculous. The first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* provides a delightful example; after a little more than two pages of dialogue, we know Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, their relationship with each other, their relationships with their daughters, their hopes and dreams, their faults and follies. The characterization of Mr. Collins is a more complex illustration. Before he appears in *Pride and Prejudice*, he has been introduced by a letter, in which he discusses his breach with the Bennet family and his eventual inheritance of the Bennet home at Longbourn:

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my later honoured father, always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with anyone, with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. . . . As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my

duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures of good-will are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate, will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the olive branch.

This passage illustrates a central tenet of Austen's writing—namely, that syntax is character. *How* someone speaks manifests the quality of his mind and character as much as or even more than *what* he says. Anyone who writes and speaks with a style as convoluted and orotund as Collins cannot be sensible. Elizabeth gets him exactly right: “There is something pompous in his style,” and if style is pompous, so is the man.

Lydia Bennet provides another example. Ignoring Elizabeth's protests, she describes her wedding to Wickham: “We were married, you know, at St. Clement's, because Wickham's lodgings were in that parish. And it was settled that we should all go there by eleven o'clock. My uncle and aunt and I were to go together; and the others were to meet us at the church. . . . And so we breakfasted at ten as usual. . . .” Yada, yada, yada. Like her sentences, Lydia's life is just one breathless thing after another. Elizabeth is right to wonder how a young woman who speaks this way can hope to find a shred of permanent happiness in marriage.

One of my favorite examples is from *Emma*, where Austen relates Mrs. Elton's stream of consciousness during a strawberry picking outing at Knightley's Donwell Abbey:

The best fruit in England—everybody's favourite—always wholesome. These the finest beds and finest sorts. Delightful to gather for oneself—the only way of really enjoying them. Morning decidedly the best time—never tired—every sort good—hautboy infinitely superior—no comparison—the others hardly eatable—hautboys very scarce—Chili preferred—white wood finest flavour of all—price of strawberries in London—abundance about Bristol—Maple Grove—cultivations—beds when to be renewed—gardeners thinking exactly different—no general rule—gardeners never to

be put out of their way—delicious fruit—only too rich to be eaten much of—inferior to cherries—currants more refreshing—only objections to gathering strawberries the stooping—glaring sun—tire to death—could bear it no longer—must go and sit in the shade.

Mrs. Elton is all here: the contradictory opinions, each stated with utter confidence, the randomness, the reversion to obsessive themes (her home of Maple Grove), the domineering know-it-all-ness. One fragmented paragraph captures a whole person.

One indication of Collins' poverty of style, and hence of mind, is poverty of metaphor. Austen has been characterized as a relentlessly non-metaphorical writer, but that is an error. Though she rarely uses explicit similes ("he is like a beast") or metaphors (though she did write in a letter, "I am a beast"), her language and her imagination are metaphorical in a different, and perhaps more profound, sense. She has an intuitive grasp of the inherent relatedness of things, and any careful study of her language will show that she often adapts language from one realm of life to describe another (e.g., economic language to describe romance). When she wishes, she is capable of producing striking metaphorical descriptions: In *Emma* she writes of Mrs. Elton's bonnet and basket as her "apparatus of happiness"; when she describes the aftermath of Elton's proposal to Emma by saying that "their straightforward emotions left no room for the little zig-zags of embarrassment"; and in *Sense and Sensibility*, she refers to the "puppyism" of Robert Ferrars's manners. All of these are very original, funny, and apt coinages.

What Austen despises is not metaphor, but metaphors that are so overworked that they ought to have been retired long ago. In a letter to Anna she warns against using the phrase "vortex of Dissipation" explaining, "I do not object to the thing, but I cannot bear the expression; it is such thorough novel slang; and so old, that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened." Metaphors tend to die and fossilize, and once this happens they can be used without thought. Like the orotund style, Collins' use