

**“ ‘A Nation Improving in Religion’:
Jane Austen’s Prayers and
Their Place in Her Life and Art”**

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Jane Austen’s prayers have a place in her writings that resembles that of many of her own heroines within their fictional worlds. Apparently of little interest, they have been generally ignored. These three short prayers survive in undated manuscripts inscribed “Prayers Composed by my ever dear Sister Jane”; the prayers themselves indicate that one member of the Austen family is reading to the assembled household at night before all retire to bed. Like Elinor Dashwood or Fanny Price or Anne Elliot, the prayers have, in general, not been attended to: biographies and critical studies tend to ignore the prayers (with some striking exceptions, to be mentioned later in this essay). Yet, like those heroines, the prayers have a good deal to say for themselves if one does listen – in this case, a good deal about Jane Austen’s life and about the novels. They tell us that Jane Austen was a devout Christian and suggest that the novels are more suffused with religious feeling than we might have thought.¹

I

The manuscripts of the prayers survive, and they have an interesting history. Jane Austen’s sister Cassandra, at her death in 1845, left two sheets of paper containing the prayers to Cassandra Esten Austen, the eldest daughter of their brother Charles. Two of Charles’s granddaughters sold them, along with other Austen papers and memorabilia, at Sotheby’s in 1927 (Le Faye, 244), for a price of £175 (Gilson, 1986, 13). They were subsequently acquired by the California book collector William Matson Roth, who brought the prayers into print for the first time, in a limited edition (of 300 copies) in 1940. Roth’s edition is on his own press, the Colt Press in San Francisco, and is meant for book collectors. His text of the prayers is a little strange: it is all in capital letters, and the punctuation is frequently modernized. When Chapman included the prayers in the *Minor Works* of 1954, the sixth and final volume of his Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen edition, the standard scholarly edition, he relegated them to the volume’s final pages and reproduced Roth’s text (though reversing his typography, using lower-case throughout). Chapman’s text is preceded by a cautiously worded headnote, which still stands in the latest printing of his edition; his headnote suggests, by its circumspection, and especially in the phrase “thought by experts to be Jane Austen’s own” (453), that the prayers may not in fact be genuine. The 1993 edition of *Catharine and Other Writings*, edited by Margaret Doody and Douglas Murray, treats the prayers as Jane Austen’s own and provides helpful footnotes; even this edition, however, bases its text, not on the manuscripts, but on a “typed transcription made by William Matson Roth” (283).

Roth donated the manuscripts in 1957 to Mills College in Oakland, California; they now reside in the Heller Rare Book Room of the F.W. Olin Library at Mills College. The prayers are found on two sheets of paper of quarto size, each folded into two leaves (or four octavo pages). The inscription “Prayers Composed by my ever dear Sister Jane” appears on the outside of the folded quarto sheet on which the first prayer, with the heading “Evening Prayer,” is written. Under the inscription, pencilled lightly, is the name “Charles Austen.” The inscription is fairly clearly in Cassandra’s own hand. The sheet has a watermark dated 1818. The handwriting of this first prayer is said by Chapman to be “probably – almost certainly? – Cassandra’s” (*MW*, 453). In fact, the inscription appears to be in a different hand from that which copied out the first prayer, and I suspect the inscription is in Cassandra’s hand and the first prayer was written out by Jane Austen’s brother Henry Austen. The second and third prayers appear, without title or number, on the second sheet of manuscript, which lacks a watermark. The second prayer appears on pages one and two of the four octavo pages, and the third prayer on pages three and four.

A fascinating question emerges here: down to the second-last line of “page three” of the second sheet (i.e., for the first half of the third prayer), one finds what seems to be the same hand as on the first sheet. However, beginning with the last line of that octavo page and on the next occurs a much neater, if still flowing, hand – handwriting that seems fairly clearly to be that of Jane Austen herself. R.A. Austen-Leigh, co-author of *Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters* and editor of *Austen Papers, 1704-1856*, was “quite sure” that it was Jane Austen’s handwriting (Roth, Introduction, 2). Chapman, however, when called in to assess the Charles Austen collection in 1926, considered the handwriting “doubtful” (Chapman, 1926, 27). If this second sheet does contain Jane Austen’s handwriting, it would obviously have to pre-date both her death in July 1817 and the sheet containing the first prayer. Chapman’s headnote in the *Minor Works* volume compounds the confusion. He says of the second MS sheet “it is partly in a hand which I think may be Henry Austen’s, partly in a hand which has been thought by experts to be JA’s own” (453). The switch from first-person ascription to passive summary underlines the implied doubt.

And yet the confusion is more apparent than actual. What does it matter who copied out the prayers if we continue to

believe – and there is no reason not to – their inscribed title, “Prayers Composed by my ever dear sister Jane”? It seems clear that Jane Austen composed the prayers, and that they were copied out, at two different times, by a combination of the Austen brothers and sisters. The manuscripts of Jane Austen’s prayers were a family production.

II

This is fitting, because Jane Austen’s prayers are communal in nature. Though one person is reading, they are the prayers of the family, not a person, and the third prayer concludes with the petition, “may we by the Assistance of thy Holy Spirit so conduct ourselves on Earth as to secure an Eternity of Happiness with each other in thy Heavenly Kingdom.”² All three prayers end with those present joining voices to recite the Lord’s Prayer; the third prayer thus goes on from the words “Heavenly Kingdom” to conclude, “Grant this most merciful Father, for the sake of our Blessed Saviour in whose Holy Name and Words we further address Thee. Our Father &c.”

Furthermore, Jane Austen’s prayers, like *The Book of Common Prayer*, which they echo in many ways and at many points, speak in a shared voice of a generic predicament (unlike the very personal *Prayers and Meditations* of her mentor Samuel Johnson). The predicament is that outlined in the Prayer Book, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and indeed in the Bible itself: men and women need God’s grace and guidance, since human nature is inherently sinful and yet proud, and so prone to self-deception and discontent. A long quotation from Jane Austen’s first prayer demonstrates that, as Henry Austen said in introducing Jane Austen as the author of her novels in 1818, “her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church” (8):

Look with Mercy on the Sins we have this day committed, and in Mercy make us feel them deeply, that our Repentance may be sincere, and our resolutions stedfast of endeavouring against the commission of such in future. Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own Hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of Temper and every evil Habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own Souls. May we now, and on each return of night, consider how the past day has been spent by us, and what have been our prevailing Thoughts, Words, and Actions during it, and how far we can acquit ourselves of Evil. Have we thought irreverently of Thee, have we disobeyed thy Commandments, have we neglected any known Duty, or willingly given pain to any human being? – Incline us to ask our Hearts these questions Oh! God, and save us from deceiving ourselves by Pride or Vanity.

Give us a thankful sense of the Blessings in which we live, of the many comforts of our lot: that we may not deserve to lose them by Discontent or Indifference.

As this passage suggests, the difficulty and yet the necessity of self-knowledge is the principal theme in Jane Austen’s prayers. A parallel theme is the struggle for Christ-like forbearance and charity (the “candour” that Jane Bennet exemplifies and Elizabeth acquires in *Pride and Prejudice*). A paragraph from Jane Austen’s third prayer is quite explicit:

Give us grace to endeavour after a truly Christian Spirit to seek to attain that temper of Forbearance and Patience, of which our Blessed Saviour has set us the highest Example and which, while it prepares us for the spiritual happiness of the life to come, will secure to us the best enjoyment of what this World can give. Incline us Oh God! to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves.

This last sentence is a summary of Jane Austen’s moral thinking – and, interestingly, it is in the middle of this sentence that Jane Austen herself (or someone whose handwriting resembles hers) begins to copy out the prayer. Note that in the prayers morality and religion coincide. In the first passage, the same acts endanger our souls and cause discomfort to fellow creatures, while thinking irreverently of God and disobeying his commandments are equated with neglecting known duties and causing pain to other human beings; in the second passage, spiritual happiness in the life to come and the best enjoyment of this world are gained by the same means.

Given her orthodox beliefs, it is not surprising that Jane Austen’s letters reveal her Augustan (and Augustinian) scorn for the new, evangelising, subjective forms of Christianity: “We do not much like Mr. Cooper’s new Sermons; they are fuller of Regeneration and Conversion than ever – with the addition of his Zeal in the cause of the Bible Society,” she writes in a letter to Cassandra in 1816 (*Letters*, 467). The British and Foreign Bible Society, by the way, was an Evangelical organization founded in 1804 that insisted on distributing free copies of the Bible *only* – unlike earlier groups such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, which gave out prayer books as well as Bibles (Collins, 194). On the other hand, Jane Austen admired the tough-minded sermons preached by Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of London, to an audience of lawyers at the Temple Church: “I am very fond of Sherlock’s Sermons, prefer them to almost any” (*Letters*, 406). One of Sherlock’s sermons, for example, takes as its text Psalms 19, verse 12: “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults”; Sherlock explains that the deadliest faults are those secret ones that result from self-ignorance, habit, or simply a failure to reflect about the consequences to others of one’s own actions, and he points out that the general petitions of *The Book of Common Prayer* cover just such faults (142-65).

Quite apart from the orthodox beliefs they express, Jane Austen’s prayers employ the diction and rhythms of *The Book of Common Prayer*, as Margaret Doody has observed (Doody, 347; Doody and Murray, 371-72). Indeed, it would be surprising if they did not: she would have heard and said the Prayer-Book prayers at least once a week throughout her life. Besides, those prayers were regarded as models: Johnson told Boswell, “I know of no good prayers but those in *The Book of Common Prayer*” (Boswell, 1292). Jane Austen’s prayers are particularly close to the Collects in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Compare, for instance, Jane Austen’s prayer for charity, which we have looked at, with the Collect for the Sunday before Lent:

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth, send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of Charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee: Grant this for

Interestingly, Jane Austen's petition for self-knowledge (represented in the long excerpt from Prayer I which I read earlier) is much more explicit than the prayers in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Two Collects, however, will serve to suggest its general derivation from the beliefs, stance, and language of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give us more than either we desire, or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. *Amen.* (Collect for the twelfth Sunday after Trinity)

O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (Collect for the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany)

The Collect, defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 as "A short comprehensive prayer, used at the Sacrament," is the form most frequently used in *The Book of Common Prayer*, and is "so called because it collects and gathers together the supplications of the multitude, speaking them all with one voice; and because it is a collection and sum of the Epistle and Gospel for the Day" (according to a seventeenth-century dictionary cited in the *OED*). In form, the Collect consists of five parts: Salutation, Ascription, Petition, Reason for Petition, and Conclusion (Tillotson, 1116). These five parts can be seen clearly in the three Collects cited above. In the first quoted, for instance (the prayer for charity), the Ascription begins with the word "who," the Petition with "send," the Reason for Petition with "without," and the Conclusion with "Grant."

The same form can be found in each of Jane Austen's prayers. The long passage from the first prayer beginning with "Look with Mercy" occurs in the second and third paragraphs of the prayer and begins the Petition, after a first paragraph devoted to Salutation and Ascription; similarly, the paragraph beginning "Give us grace" is the second paragraph of the third prayer and begins the Petition after an opening paragraph of Salutation and Ascription.

The beliefs, language, and form of the Prayer-Book prayers were, of course, found in many other books of prayers that Jane Austen knew, including Johnson's *Prayers and Meditations*, published in 1785 and cited frequently at length in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, which Jane Austen seems to have known by heart.⁴ Another intermediate model for Jane Austen's prayers is one of the twenty surviving books that she owned, *A companion to the altar: shewing the nature & necessity of a sacramental preparation in order to our worthy receiving the Holy Communion, to which are added Prayers and meditations*. Apparently written by William Vickers and published in 1793 "this book of devotions always used by Jane Austen," to quote her great-niece Florence Austen, is inscribed with her signature and the date 1794 (Gilson, 1982, 445). It is a guide for those about to be confirmed in the Church of England; Jane Austen's copy was probably presented to her at the time of her own confirmation – she was 18 in 1794 (see Tucker, 203-04).

One interesting difference between Jane Austen's prayers and those of the Prayer Book lies in their language: Jane Austen's is scrupulously conceptual and non-figurative. The Prayer Book, a monument of Renaissance sensibility, is much more "poetic": for instance, "pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of Charity, the very bond of peace, and of all virtues" (in the prayer for charity that I have read) is much more concrete and metaphorical than the equivalent phrasing in Jane Austen's third prayer, and the same can be said of phrases such as "we cannot always stand upright" in the Collects cited above. Jane Austen concurs with Samuel Johnson in this respect: Johnson notoriously disapproved of Milton's use in *Lycidas* of "trifling fictions" to convey "the most awful and sacred truths" (Johnson, 699), and Johnson tells Boswell roundly, "I do not approve of figurative expressions in addressing the Supreme Being; and I never use them" (Boswell, 1293).

In general, then, Jane Austen's prayers are meant to be read as the work of the common, generic believer, not the idiosyncratic individual – as first-person plural speech rather than first-person singular. Like the Prayer Book, her prayers are not conceived of as literature, though they may have super-added literary interest or value. A passage from *Mansfield Park* dramatizes the point neatly. Henry Crawford is addressing Edmund, but also trying to impress Fanny with his knowledge of religion:

Our liturgy [Henry says] has beauties, which not even a careless, slovenly style of reading can destroy; but it also has redundancies and repetitions, which require good reading not to be felt. For myself, at least, I must confess being not always so attentive as I ought to be – (here was a glance at Fanny) that nineteen times out of twenty I am thinking how such a prayer ought to be read, and longing to have it to read myself – Did you speak? (340)

The contrast between "our" and "I" as attitudes to prayer could hardly be sharper, as Fanny's evident, if unspoken, gestures of dissent suggests.

III

Jane Austen's prayers tell us a good deal about her life. At the same time, they raise some very puzzling questions – which is no doubt why Jane Austen's biographers have by and large left them alone.

The most important thing they tell us is also the most obvious: that Jane Austen had a deep and sincere religious faith. Her prayers provide the most telling, if far from the only, evidence of this piety. Proof exists also in her one serious poem, on the death of her friend Mrs. Lefroy (*MW*, 440-42); the comments she makes about religious books in her letters (where we find, for instance, in addition to her disapproval of Dr. Cooper's sermons and her praise of Sherlock's, her statement to Cassandra that she is pleased with the Reverend Thomas Gisborne's Evangelical conduct-book, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* [*Letters*, 169]); the passages of religious consolation in her letters (e.g. *Letters*, 19, 144, 219-

20); and her attitude of pious submission in the letters written shortly before her death (*Letters*, 493-98). And, of course, her grandfather, her father, and two of her brothers were clergymen, as were many others in the family circle, including Cassandra Austen's fiancé Thomas Fowle, who died of yellow fever before they could marry. As Jan Fergus observes in her recent biography, "For Austen, religion was an essential part of her daily life" (36).

Jane Austen's prayers also point to the effect that *The Book of Common Prayer* must have had upon her style. Her prayers display the syntactical control and balance, the diction, and the speech-rhythms that characterize both *The Book of Common Prayer* and Jane Austen's own prose when she is writing formally. Doody summarizes the cause for such an influence:

The Book of Common Prayer is, to speak profanely, a good influence on style. Its sentiments are emphatic without crudity, and its cadences have the grace of strength rather than of decoration. It is also a language meant to be spoken aloud It is here, I believe, that we must look for the origins of Austen's balanced and coordinated sentences rather than to the later and more partial influence of Johnson. (347-48)

However, Jane Austen's prayers do raise some difficult biographical questions. Some of these questions are: Did the Austen family hold evening prayers at home? What is the date at which the prayers were composed? Why do only three short prayers by Jane Austen survive? The answers to these questions must be tentative and incomplete (which is why they have not been treated by her biographers); still, a certain amount can be said.

It does seem likely that the Austen family observed evening prayers at home: both *Gisborne* and *A companion to the altar* recommend it, and in *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price says of morning and evening prayers at Sotherton, "A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine" (86). Jane Austen's letters do not allude specifically to evening prayers, but a letter written to Cassandra on a Sunday night in 1808 refers to evening devotions (which would include prayers): "In the evening we had the Psalms and Lessons, and a sermon at home" (*Letters*, 227).

As for their date of composition, surmise is the best we can do: the prayers themselves contain no hint of their date. It seems quite possible that Jane Austen would have composed the prayers only after the death of her father, an active and devout clergyman, in 1805. Deirdre Le Faye states in her biography of Jane Austen, without explanation, that "These prayers are undated, but seem to be products of Jane Austen's later life" (274). Certainly, the three novels that Jane Austen composed during the final years of her life at Chawton (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*) have a much more overtly religious dimension than the first three, drafted during the 1790s. Marilyn Butler argues that during the last ten years of her life Jane Austen was influenced by "the wartime religious reform movement spearheaded by the Evangelicals. Austen's last three novels are profounder than the first three, not because they express an inward religious intensity, but because they are caught up in a national mood of self-assessment and regeneration" (Butler, 1986, 207). Certainly the modern reader, and especially the modern North American reader, must experience some shock upon reading a Jane Austen letter of 1814 in which, speaking of the War of 1812, she says, quite unironically it seems, "If we are to be ruined, it cannot be helped – but I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation in spite of much Evil improving in Religion, which I cannot believe the Americans to possess" (*Letters*, 508). Like the French, this implies, the Americans have used a revolution to introduce a godless republic.

Conjecture, again, must suffice as to why only three short prayers by Jane Austen survive. It is possible, but I suspect unlikely, that Jane Austen wrote further prayers that do not survive. Jane Austen's three prayers were probably meant to supplement other prayers that the family would normally use at evening prayers – prayers from the Prayer Book, or from other books of devotion, or indeed prayers composed by other family members, and especially Jane Austen's clergyman father and brothers. Irene Collins, in her 1993 book *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, surmises that Jane Austen composed her prayers, sometime after Mr. Austen's death, in order to have them to read on occasions when Cassandra was away from home and Jane was serving as the head of the household (193).

These concrete questions, however, pale beside the overwhelming question posed by Jane Austen's prayers: that of consistency. They seem so different from her letters – chatty and observant, gossipy and often malicious – and from her novels – so worldly in tone, so seemingly silent on spiritual matters. And just as with the specific biographical questions, this question has been generally avoided: it is no easy matter to reconcile the Jane Austen revealed in her prayers with the catty letter-writer and the shrewd comic novelist. Park Honan, in his *Jane Austen: Her Life*, does face the issue and even offers a view of the novels as Jane Austen's resolution of an inner conflict:

There is no greater contrast in Jane Austen's writings than that between her sharp, comically malicious letters and the Christian prayers she composed Her prayers suggest that as a rational woman of deep feeling she felt abject and solemnly and terribly accountable, by no means pleased with herself. The effort of reconciling her faith with her fury was enough to try her, and as happy as she was in green country at Chawton she was to make amends in part through her fictional comedies in which no living being is attacked, but life itself is recreated and appraised for every reader. (255; cf. 124)

One way of tackling this issue is to simplify it. The real problem lies in the apparent discrepancy between the prayers and the novels. The letters are mainly of interest because they are written by Jane Austen the novelist; furthermore, the letters are much more mixed in tone than the most acid (and memorable) excerpts from them suggest – it would not be hard to produce a set of excerpts that would make them seem entirely pious and proper. None of us is, or would like to be, everywhere and always the same. And in any case Jane Austen's letters survive only in part and have the intimate obliqueness of writing not meant to be read outside the family circle. What Jane Austen says in her letters can hardly be held against her. The novels, however, are a very different matter.

dimension. For instance,

Jane Austen the novelist did not believe in God She did not arrange, control, or interpret her deepest experience in the light of [her piety]. (Lerner, 23)

Jane Austen draws the curtain between her Sunday thoughts, whatever they were, and her creative imagination. Her heroines face their moral difficulties and solve their moral problems without recourse to religious faith or theological doctrines. (Ryle, 117)

Of course, there is another view, one that sees Jane Austen as less schizophrenic and the novels as less simply secular. A.C. Bradley put it succinctly in his essay of 1911: "Her inmost mind lay in her religion – a religion powerful in her life and not difficult to trace in her novels, but quiet, untheoretical, and rarely openly expressed" (29). This is the view of the novels taken in the first essay to be devoted to Jane Austen's novels, Richard Whately's review-essay on *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in the *Quarterly Review* in 1821 [Whately was later to become the Archbishop of Dublin]:

Miss Austin [*sic*] has the merit (in our judgment most essential) of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion not being at all obtrusive. ... The subject is rather alluded to, and that incidentally, than studiously brought forward and dwelt upon.

The moral lessons also of this lady's novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward, but spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story; they are not forced upon the reader, but he is left to collect them (though without any difficulty) for himself; her's is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life. (Southam, 95)

Whately's conception of the interdependence of fiction, morality, and religion is, I believe, shared by Jane Austen herself. Two incompetent readers from her fiction, Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* and Sir Edward Denham of *Sanditon*, illustrate the point. Catherine as a girl has a natural tendency to read without thinking: "provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all" (15); Sir Edward is much worse, since he perversely misinterprets Richardson's *Clarissa*: "ill-luck ... made him derive only false Principles from Lessons of Morality, & incentives to Vice from the History of it's Overthrow" (*MW*, 405).

Jane Austen's prayers confirm this view of Jane Austen as "Christian writer." Both Bradley and Whately wrote without knowledge of the prayers. Several recent critics of the novels develop roughly the same conception of the novelist; in addition to the books I have already mentioned, there are brief references to Jane Austen's prayers in Stuart Tave's *Some Words of Jane Austen* (see 112-13), Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (see 189, 192, 196), and Gene Koppel's *The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels* (see 7-9, 52).

Nevertheless, the relationship between Jane Austen's prayers and her novels is a subject that is worth exploring, but largely unexplored. I would like to conclude by outlining three ways in which the prayers illuminate the novels.

The first way is the most obvious: the beliefs and terms of the prayers inform the novels. One quick way of demonstrating this is to cite part of Marianne's long speech of contrition in *Sense and Sensibility*:

I wonder at my recovery, – wonder that the very eagerness of my desire to live, to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all, did not kill me at once Whenever I looked toward the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. (303)

Note that this speech assumes that religious and moral duties coincide ("to my God, and to you all") – the same assumption that we saw earlier in both Jane Austen's prayers and Whately's account of her novels. By far the most striking aspect of the prayers is their insistence on self-knowledge (an insistence based, as we have seen, on a belief in original sin), and of course Jane Austen's novels, particularly the two best of them. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, are dramas of self-discovery. The prayers also stress "candour" (or charity of judgment). Jane Austen's third prayer, as we have seen, shows that Jane Austen considered that it is natural "to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own," to use Darcy's words from the concluding pages of *Pride and Prejudice* (369). That is, one can think meanly ("severely" is the word in the prayer) of others and well of oneself, like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet when they are still unreformed, or apply the golden rule and reverse that natural tendency – thereby becoming able to think well of others and severely of oneself (like Miss Bates, or Jane Bennet, or the reformed heroines). A related conflict between gratitude and discontent is central in both the prayers and the fiction.

These ideas suggest a second way in which Jane Austen's prayers may throw light on her novels. The prayers do, as I have argued, speak for a community of believers, rather than as the voice of a particular individual; nevertheless, they do reveal a distinctive emphasis. The central petition of all three prayers is for self-knowledge, with an explicitness that has no model in *The Book of Common Prayer*; similarly, in her third prayer Jane Austen seeks charity of judgment (whereas the Prayer-Book Collect I read earlier speaks of charity in "all our doings"). The prayers, thus, must reveal to us the failings to which Jane Austen felt she was most inclined. We can then see the novels as having at their heart the struggles that dominated Jane Austen's own inner life: the struggles for self-knowledge, charity of mind, gratitude, and the other virtues of the prayers. This conception of the novels' basis in Jane Austen's experience is old-fashioned, but it may none the less be true, and it is at least less lurid than Park Honan's suggestion that in her novels Jane Austen "makes amends" for her spiritual lapses.

Honan does, however, link the prayers to Jane Austen's choice of comedy, the choice that she refers to when she writes to the Prince Regent's librarian, the Reverend J.S. Clarke, "I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way" (*Letters*, 453), and this connection with comedy is a third and final way in which the prayers illuminate the novels. In the prayers, as in Christianity as a whole, life is a Divine Comedy: it is good, just, harmonious, and all will turn out well in the end – unless "we ..., by our own neglect, throw away the salvation Thou hast given us" (Prayer I). And so it is in the

novels: for every Emma there is a Mr. Knightley, for every Elizabeth a Mr. Darcy, for every Anne a Captain Wentworth (and vice-versa). Furthermore, good and bad actions, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy* are not only part of a moral cause-and-effect sequence, so that the good end happily and the bad unhappily (in the words of Wilde's Miss Prism); these actions express spiritual states which are themselves fitting rewards or punishments. The final and exact reward for Emma (or punishment for Mrs. Elton) is simply to go on being what she has chosen to become. Ironically, nothing could in the end be more harmonious than the disharmony Lucy Steele has achieved at the end of *Sense and Sensibility*.

[Robert and Lucy Ferrars] settled in town, received very liberal assistance from Mrs. Ferrars, were on the best terms imaginable with the Dashwoods; and setting aside the jealousies and ill will continually subsisting between Fanny and Lucy, in which their husbands of course took a part, as well as the frequent domestic disagreements between Robert and Lucy themselves, nothing could exceed the harmony in which they all lived together. (377)

This comic vision that justice prevails in the long run is, I suspect, the explanation for the view, voiced by Richard Whately and shared by many of us today, that Jane Austen's novels offer "that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life."

NOTES

- ¹ Jane Austen's prayers are treated more fully in my essay, " 'The Sentient Target of Death': Jane Austen's Prayers," in *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Profession*, ed. Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel, to be published by the Macmillan Press in 1995.
- ² The text of Jane Austen's prayers cited here is slightly modernized. This paper was delivered at the brunch during the JASNA annual meeting in New Orleans; a small green booklet containing this text of the prayers was distributed to each guest at the brunch.
- ³ *The Book of Common Prayer* was standardized in 1662; quotations here are from the Oxford: Clarendon Press edition of 1803.
- ⁴ She alludes to Boswell's *Life* at least six times in the *Letters* (*Letters*, 32, 33, 49, 181, 363, 368); she paraphrases Boswell's final tribute to Johnson at the end of her poem "To the Memory of Mrs. Lefroy" (cf. *Life*, 1394-95, and *MW*, 442); and Jane Austen's image of "my dear Dr. Johnson" (*Letters*, 181) was no doubt derived largely from Boswell's presentation of Johnson – just as Jane Austen uses the phrase, as Chapman points out in his note on the letter, in the course of agreeing with an opinion in a letter from Johnson to Boswell cited by the latter in his *Life* (563).

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In real life, Jane Austen lived in Bath for about five years, she did not enjoy living there; she disliked its society constant 'parading' their wealth and status. Anne goes to stay in the countryside with her sister Mary and her family.Â Most Jane Austen fans will have a favourite female character from her various novels and I would like to make a case here for Anne Elliot from *Persuasion* as one of Jane Austen's more compelling heroines.Â It is worth seeing this adaptation for the kiss at the end which takes place in a busy market street in Bath - how shocking, kissing in public! The 2007 version of *Persuasion* stars actress Sally Hawkins as Anne Elliot and she also does an amazing job of playing Anne just as she is written. Though Austen may have written additional prayers in her lifetime, three prayers were kept by Cassandra with these words written on them: "composed by my ever dear Sister Jane" (Stovel). The date of her prayers is unknown, but many Austen scholars note that the writing style and handwriting is similar to her adult writing. Framed copies of her prayers hang in the churches at Steventon and Chawton, as well as in her bedroom at Chawton Cottage (Jane Austen's™s

House Museum). A Prayer by Jane Austen. Image Rachel Dodge.Â Stovel, Bruce. "A Nation Improving in Religion": Jane Austen's Prayers and Their Place in Her Life and Art," *Persuasions*, 16 (1994): 185-196. Other posts on this blog about Jane Austen's death: [Click here](#). Share with others