The Literary Economy of Jane Austen and George Crabbe

COLIN WINBORN

ROUTLEDGE

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In memoriam, James Hansford (1951-1999)

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This book is dedicated to the memory of James Hansford.

The Nineteenth Century Series General Editors' Preface

The aim of the series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. It centres primarily upon major authors and subjects within Romantic and Victorian literature. It also includes studies of other British writers and issues, where these are matters of current debate: for example, biography and autobiography, journalism, periodical literature, travel writing, book production, gender and non-canonical writing. We are dedicated principally to publishing original monographs and symposia; our policy is to embrace a broad scope in chronology, approach and range of concern, and both to recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas and theories, while valuing traditional scholarship. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, in the wider sweep, and in the lively streams of disputation and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
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Introduction

I – Overview

Jane Austen and the poet George Crabbe have often been linked together as the two great anti-Romantics of the early nineteenth century, but this affinity, hinted at by critics, has never really been explored. They were two authors who published all their major work in the so-called 'Romantic Age', yet without being 'Romantics' themselves. However, rather than suggesting that what unites them is simply a 'belated Augustanism', it is my argument that what draws them together is a common concern with economy, and in particular with *spatial* economy; and that this concern was of particular urgency during the period in which they were writing.

By 'spatial economy', I mean – to use a phrase with particular resonance during this period – the turning of available resources to the best possible account. I demonstrate how this is a concern for both authors in the very practice of writing, as they work to economize on the space of the page (Austen in her letters, Crabbe in the couplet). These writers are not just being 'spare' or 'sparing'; they are working within, and actively converting, positive limitations. I go on to politicize the notion of spatial economy, demonstrating how it is also central to wider social and political writings of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In this way the overall movement of my study is from the local to the national and general. It begins with verbal details, and proceeds to show how these details have certain atomic qualities, which are energized within wider political structures of meaning.

The main context of my book is provided by the Napoleonic Wars, and in particular the economic pressure of the Napoleonic trade embargo (1806-1812), which transformed the way people conceptualized national space and the appropriate use of resources. Although both Crabbe and Austen were writing during this period, their work has yet to be read critically in its wartime economic context. It is my argument that these authors were unusually responsive to the economic anxieties of their time. In the work of both writers, we find a preoccupation with boundaries, pressure and containment, which also informs economic treatises published in the first decade of the nineteenth century. By translating national topics into the local spaces of their writing, Crabbe and Austen are not 'miniaturizing' them in any conventional sense; rather, they are 'maximizing' them by testing them within a more localized, even domestic context.

This study, therefore, will highlight some of the ways in which literary and economic discourses during the Napoleonic Wars had in common a concern with spatial economy, and even at times possessed a shared vocabulary. However, in Chapter Four, I extend the scope of my enquiry to show how this vocabulary is also implicated in the discourse of landscape gardening, thus engaging the

economic with the aesthetic. To this end, I have chosen to focus on three of Humphry Repton's Red Books, partly for the reason that they are studied far less than Repton's other, more famous work: I wish to demonstrate how certain wartime economic preoccupations are present even in more 'marginal' writings of the period.

My approach to Crabbe and Austen is one which combines close reading with fresh contextual and historical analysis. As well as making use of twentieth-century theorists, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, I also have chosen to draw upon and develop the ideas of thinkers contemporaneous with my primary authors: most importantly, Thomas Malthus, William Spence, William Cobbett, Arthur Young and Humphry Repton. I demonstrate how their work may be used to illuminate Austen and Crabbe, and at the same time open a dialogue between different discourses (literary, economic, aesthetic), which might enhance our understanding of their interrelation. My study invests much in the niceties of language: not only in relation to Austen and Crabbe, but also in the work of the commentators that I address. This is partly because I am concerned to show how 'local' details are part of a wider picture, and indeed are transformed when seen in that way (they are no longer merely 'details', but are discovered to have latent energy); however, it is also because even now contextual material is rarely subjected to close reading in interpretations of Crabbe and Austen, and I wish to indicate how fruitful such a procedure might be. Language itself is instinct with history and historical forces. This is why more than once a particular word's etymological roots are dug up. What Geoffrey Hill once said in an interview about poetry, may be extended to other species of writing: 'In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history'.[1]

A critical work about space must be very conscious of what it excludes. First of all, therefore, it may well be asked why I have chosen to focus on certain primary texts, and to omit others. This study gives extended readings of Austen's *Emma* (1816) and *Mansfield Park* (1814), and Crabbe's 'The Gentleman Farmer' (one of the *Tales* of 1812) and *The Borough* (1810), although I do also make reference to other texts, particularly *Persuasion* (1818). It was very much my intention to focus on fewer texts and in more detail, rather than move superficially over a greater number. This approach allows me to focus on the particular and local ways in which one text illuminates, or is involved linguistically with, another; and it also permits more room for the thorough grounding of context.

The reasons for choosing *Mansfield Park* in Chapter Four may seem self-evident. It is the novel of Austen's which contains the most explicit references to landscape gardening, and the general issue of landscape and its management is more obviously prominent than in the other texts. It is also the only novel of hers to contain explicit references to Repton. Chapter Three is concerned with national economy, and the exploitation of space on a national scale through agricultural improvement and enclosure. It is my contention that in *Emma*, Highbury functions as a microcosm of the state, allowing Austen to play out issues of national consequence on a domestic scale. The fact that my study does not deal more substantially with *Persuasion* may perhaps seem odd, particularly since it is the novel of Austen's that deals most overtly with economy – but this is just the point.

Persuasion deals perhaps *too* explicitly with economy, and this aspect of it has already been well discussed by other critics, especially Edward Copeland. It has proved more challenging, and more productive, to engage with texts in which the economic issues are submerged. Nonetheless, Chapter Two does contain an original reading of *Persuasion*.

As far as Crabbe goes, as I suggested earlier, my major readings are of three of the *Tales*: 'The Dumb Orators', 'Procrastination' and 'The Gentleman Farmer', and also *The Borough*. Crabbe's three longest works (*The Borough*, *Tales*, and *Tales of the Hall* (1819)) can be read in two ways, with two different emphases: they can be read in themselves as long integrated poems (i.e., the *Tales* constitute one poem, and cannot be broken up); or they can be read as if they are collections of individual, self-sufficient poems, loosely gathered into a whole (by which reading, *The Borough* is not as important as its constituent parts). In this study I have deliberately set out to read Crabbe from both critical perspectives, since both seem equally valid: I have interpreted 'The Dumb Orators', 'Procrastination' and 'The Gentleman Farmer' as individual texts, and I have read *The Borough* as a poem which depends on the overall impact of its interconnected parts. I have paired up 'The Gentleman Farmer' with *Emma*, since, like Austen's novel, it contracts comparable national concerns into a localized sphere. Both *The Borough* and *Mansfield Park* illuminate, and are illuminated by, Repton's aesthetic economizing of space in the Red Books.

Chapter One is concerned primarily with close reading, and the local habitation of Crabbe's verse. I try to show how the poet deploys the couplet in such a way as to economize – on sound and sense, and the physical space of the page. I also demonstrate how the acoustic restrictions of this poetic form are, paradoxically, enabling for Crabbe. Chapter Two then goes on to situate this verbal detail in a new context, one that is developed in the remainder of this study. As will be seen, the particular pressures of the couplet are responsive not only to the Poor Law debate, but also to wider, national pressures. Jane Austen's work is here brought in more substantially, as is the work of Thomas Malthus, whose *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) sheds new light on the work of both authors. Chapter Three develops this Malthusian connection, and opens out to consider the wider reaches of political economy during the Napoleonic Wars. I consider Britain's response to the commercial restrictions of the Napoleonic Wars, and in particular the Continental System, instituted by Napoleon in his Berlin decree of 1806; and as part of a wider economic appraisal, I also consider the enclosure movement, which accelerated dramatically during the last decade of the eighteenth century, and the first two decades of the nineteenth. This economic context is then brought to bear upon the ways in which Crabbe and Austen's writing is artistically in touch with, and shaped by, pressures being felt on a national level. Chapter Four, finally, moves from the economic to the aesthetic, in order to address the work of the landscape gardener, Humphry Repton. My chapter politicizes Repton's work, arguing that its configuration of landscape also bears witness to the importance of spatial economy; and that it, too, is responsive to the exigencies of war. The language of the economic infuses the Red Books, with their emphasis on boundaries, interior virtue and containment. In arguing against the popular opinion

that Austen was unequivocally opposed to Reptonian improvement, I contend that the landscaper might even be seen as an animating presence in both her work, and that of Crabbe.

II – Critical Histories

Both George Crabbe and Jane Austen have in the past been regarded as authors out of sympathy with the temper of their times: as anachronisms, or Augustan throwbacks. Leavis' famous pronouncement on Crabbe typified this attitude: 'His sensibility belongs to an order that those who were most alive to the age – who had the most sensitive antennae – had ceased to find sympathetic'.[2] Over the last thirty years, however, much valuable work has been done to historicize and rethink their cultural location (particularly that of Austen, since she is evidently the more canonical of the pair). They are no longer regarded as being simply 'anti-Romantic' in spirit (whatever this might mean) and equally they are no longer insulated from the social and political forces that shaped the Regency period. Nevertheless, even the latest critical accounts can subtly perpetuate certain myths (or mythologizations) regarding their writing, and these can be traced back to the earliest critical receptions of these writers.

John Lucas has recently offered a charged and highly suggestive reading of Crabbe, that sets out to challenge customary assumptions about his work. However, when Austen enters the proceedings, Lucas falls back momentarily on just those assumptions his essay elsewhere challenges with such force:

> For though Crabbe is a kind of official moralist for the *via media*, for moderation and good sense – not for nothing did Jane Austen imagine herself the second Mrs Crabbe – he is again and again drawn to that which lies beyond the pale of decorum, of the acceptable.[3]

In an essay which otherwise finds Crabbe's 'decorum' muddied with what it tries to refuse, it is disappointing to find Lucas suggesting here that what draws Austen to Crabbe is only the poet's predictable stance as 'official moralist', *not*, significantly, his darker territory that 'lies beyond the pale of...the acceptable'. In Lucas' opinion, Austen imagines herself the second Mrs Crabbe because of the poet's reasonable 'moderation' and 'good sense'. Such a yoking of the two authors is far from new, and indeed is not so different from one of the earliest comparisons of their work.

For Lady Shelley, writing in 1819, what is 'moderate' and 'reasonable' to Lucas is merely low. The writing of Austen and Crabbe is distasteful to her because it is reluctant to take wing and rise out of the *via media*:

> The same objection may be made to all Jane Austen's novels, and also to most of Crabbe's poetry. Surely works of imagination should raise us above our everyday feelings, and excite in us those *élans passagères* of virtue and sensibility which are exquisite and ennobling, and which, if

> they were not evanescent, would exalt our poor humanity in the scale of being.[4]

William Empson, writing in 1835 in the *Edinburgh Review*, finds the fact that Crabbe and Austen do not rise to the 'Romantic' theme a virtue. Their unusually low station gives them the ability to observe closely what is on the ground, what is ordinary or everyday. Empson's review values the 'marvellous exactness' of their art; Austen and Crabbe are able to see things perhaps passed over in the airy ascendancy of other poets. He suggests that it is 'artists and connoisseurs' who are peculiarly qualified to read Crabbe's poetry: 'They will admire in these poems the clear and microscopic observation of ordinary existence, delineated, as it is with the marvellous exactness of Miss Austin's [*sic*] novels, and carried into a variety of regions where she durst never venture'.[5] The mutual capacity to observe and attend to detail, I shall argue, closely affines Crabbe and Austen, and is the basis for the extraordinary tact and economy of their writing.

However, Austen's powers of minute observation offended John Henry Newman, for whom the novelist's attention to the particular proved closer in spirit to the fastidiousness of Mr Woodhouse than the benevolent circumspection of Mr Knightley: 'The action [of *Emma*] is frittered away in over-little things'.[6] In recent years, Ronald Hatch has more positively suggested that it is this ability to perceive 'little things' (fineness of perception) which links Austen with Crabbe. Discussing 'The Frank Courtship', Hatch finds that Crabbe 'portrays a particular moment in a family situation, and, it may be added, with a tone remarkably similar to that of Jane Austen. Crabbe has a striking ability to use the subtle indirection of physical detail to characterize people'.[7] And later in the same volume: 'Like Jane Austen, Crabbe stresses the necessity of clear perceptions at all times so that the emotions can be directed to real objects and not projections of the mind' (p. 202).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, few commentators seemed interested in considering Crabbe and Austen intertextually. Edward FitzGerald, like Byron a great admirer of Crabbe, was baffled by the seductive pull his work exerted on Austen's imagination. He felt Austen's vision of 'genteel humanity' to be far removed from Crabbe's stern depictions of vice and poverty. He wrote in 1879: 'Miss Austen, indeed, who is still so much renowned for her representation of genteel humanity, was so unaccountably smitten with Crabbe in his worsted hose, that she playfully declared that she would not refuse him for her husband'.[8] A more thorough comparison was made by an anonymous reviewer in the *Saturday Review* (1864), one which measured the relative achievement of poet and novelist: 'Perhaps, in mere power of conceiving character and arranging incidents, [Crabbe] was about equal to Miss Austen as a writer of fiction, and numerous points of resemblance between the two writers will present themselves to any one who will compare their respective works'.[9] Although the review remains vague as to the 'numerous points of resemblance' between the two authors, its turn of phrase is suggestive. The ability to *arrange* is called to attention as a particular strength of both writers. Certainly Crabbe and Austen share a gift for arrangement, for the careful disposal of objects within a limited space: Crabbe's arrangement of the couplet, Austen's arrangement of the sentence and the printed page.

Among the manifold critical works published in this century on Austen, very few have considered the novelist's work in any kind of substantial relation to Crabbe. The 'numerous points of resemblance' continue to remain largely unobserved. In 1927, E.H.W. Meyerstein, writing in the *TLS*, noted a significant allusion to Crabbe in *Mansfield Park*. Not only does Fanny Price have a copy of the *Tales* in the East room; but additionally, her name itself is taken from 'The Parish Register' (1807). Crabbe's Fanny Price is the daughter of a bailiff, and is subjected to the amorous advances of one Sir Edward Archer (Henry Crawford's progenitor, perhaps), but finally refuses him. The parallels are striking. Meyerstein also suggests that one of Austen's letters contains a specific allusion to 'The Parish Register'. He refers to the missive (previously quoted) in which the novelist expresses disappointment at having missed Crabbe at the theatre: 'I felt sure of him when I saw that the boxes were fitted up with Crimson velvet' (*Letters*, p. 220). The 'Crimson velvet' described here, according to Meyerstein, 'is in playful allusion to the Lady of the Manor' in 'The Parish Register'.[10] He quotes the following text:

> Slow to the vault they come, with heavy tread,
> Bending beneath the *Lady* and her lead;
> A case of elm surrounds that ponderous chest,
> Close on that case the crimson velvet's press'd;
> Ungenerous this, that to the worm denies,
> With niggard-caution, his appointed Prize.[11]

This critic urges us to 'remember, too, that in the "Tales" (1812), which were among the books in the East room at Mansfield, a carpet rises "with crimson glow" ("Procrastination"), and there are "crimson chairs" ("The Patron")' (p. 232).

But what are we to make of these allusions? E.E. Duncan-Jones also notes them in a short piece for the *Review of English Studies*, evidently unaware of Meyerstein's prior remarks.[12] Sharon Footerman, in a slightly lengthier piece, goes so far as to say 'that the story of Fanny Price, in all its essential details, occurs in the second part of George Crabbe's poem, *The Parish Register*'.[13] However, the ensuing article does not do any kind of justice to the complexity of relation between these two authors. Footerman unashamedly neglects Crabbe's own artistic merit. She writes in such a way as to suggest that 'The Parish Register' only provides rude material to be sifted and refined in Austen's nicer imagination. There is no sense that Crabbe's poem is of any interest in itself: merely as something that exists to be rewrought by a subtler intellect. This critic writes dismissively of the 'pious, evangelical spirit of Crabbe's tale', and reduces it to the level of 'a simple moral fable, ideally suited to serve as the skeleton of a more complex moral situation, and Jane Austen has used it to supply the framework of the conflict in *Mansfield Park*' (p. 218). Perhaps the most fertile and fair-minded suggestion as to why Austen alludes so explicitly to Crabbe in *Mansfield Park* is provided by the biographer, David Nokes. Commenting on the familiar allusion in the correspondence to the death of Mrs Crabbe, Nokes picks up on Austen's comic refusal to have anything to do with Crabbe's offspring: 'She did *not* undertake "to

be good" to poor Mrs Crabbe's children, she said, so "she had better not leave any"'.[14] Austen's dislike of children in the flesh is well-known.[15] But perhaps the thought of literary congress and its issue was less offensive to her. Hence Nokes' delightful proposition that Austen's borrowing of 'Fanny Price' from 'The Parish Register' is a kind of cross-fertilization of words:

> She made sure to have Fanny Price include Crabbe's *Tales* among her favourite books; but how many readers, she wondered, would recognize that Fanny Price's own name was borrowed from the heroine of Crabbe's *Parish Register*? In that way, she and the poet had already conceived one literary offspring of their own.
> (p. 427)

Fanny Price, unlike the potentially disruptive presence of more literal offspring, does not interfere with Austen's regimented existence. For this author, it was necessary that certain worlds be kept apart. She recommends the 'simple regimen of separate rooms' to a family of eighteen children;[16] and equally, she feels that the art of writing must if possible be kept separate from 'family cares':

> And how good M^rs^ West c^d^ have written such Books and collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb.[17]

Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, therefore, is a point of connection between Crabbe and Austen, but one which also keeps the two authors at a distance from each other (Austen would only ever *joke* about becoming the next Mrs Crabbe). The regimen of separate rooms is maintained.

Only a few other critics have given salience to the affinities of Crabbe and Austen. Jocelyn Harris suggests that the novelist's description of the Portsmouth household in *Mansfield Park* adapts a passage from *The Borough*. In her view Austen 'proves Crabbe's thesis that poverty degrades'.[18] Gavin Edwards, in an important recent study, compares briefly *Mansfield Park* with one of the *Tales of the Hall*, 'Delay Has Danger', which also features a heroine called Fanny (were Crabbe and Austen alternating flirtatious allusions during these years?). Edwards contends that the protagonists of the two texts 'certainly inhabit the same border land where uncertainty about one's class and family are linked to uncertainty about one's place in the life-cycle'.[19] He considers the ambiguity expressed in *Mansfield Park* over Fanny's class and status, linking this with Crabbe's equivocation in 'Delay has Danger' over 'kinship roles, economic roles, political roles, and so on' (Edwards, p. 25).

John Speirs is another critic who sets out to wed Crabbe and Austen, but there are distinctive grounds for objection. In his *Poetry towards Novel* he aligns them more than once, but joins Leavis in finding them to be belated Augustans. For Speirs, these two authors are 'still in the line from the Augustans, though developing in their art new psychological insights into the individual in relation to the family and to society'.[20] According to Speirs' reading, Crabbe is something of a

novelist *manqué*, whose achievement has to do with 'realistic' representation of the individual mind and society. What is not addressed here, therefore, is the question of why Crabbe should have chosen to write in verse; we know from his son that he did write novels, but destroyed them. Chapter One will take this question as a starting point: why *did* Crabbe write in verse? And why was he peculiarly drawn to the couplet? Seeing him merely 'in the line from the Augustans' is inadequate as a response. Speirs not only backdates the two authors; he also isolates them from their social, political and literary context by assigning unhelpful labels to them: 'It might be supposed, therefore, that these final poems of Byron would take their place with the two great anti-Romantics or (as they should more properly be called) non-Romantics of the early 19th century, Crabbe and Jane Austen (as well as the lesser Peacock)' (p. 202). Neither 'anti-Romantic' nor 'non-Romantic' is exploited as a useful term here. Fortunately, such labels – and the label of 'Romantic' itself – have been subjected to considerable, and generally enlightening, critical scrutiny in recent years. What does it mean to say a writer is 'Romantic', or 'anti-' or 'non-' Romantic? Is the 'Romantic era' to be perceived as synonymous with the Regency? One critic powerfully engaged in this debate is Edwards, who demonstrates how Crabbe's poetry has much in common with his more canonical contemporaries. When Edwards writes that the poet 'is not a belated pre-Romantic but an anti-Romantic' (Edwards, p. 30), his handling of the terms is dextrous and self-aware.

What is it, therefore, which sets apart Crabbe and Austen so firmly from their Romantic context? This is the question begged by Speirs' earlier assertion, and is in fact one that he endeavours partially to answer: '[Crabbe and Austen] recognize that the forms and conventions of a society may become too rigid, may be felt to be constricting and cramping for the livelier or more intelligent individuals in it. But they retain a respect for the forms and conventions of civilized society, even while being critical of them' (Speirs, pp. 203-04). Speirs sees the two authors as staying within the boundaries of decorum even while criticizing them for being (in certain circumstances) harmfully constrictive. My own study will offer a different paradigm, one which reconfigures the relation between freedom and constraint in more fluid terms. For Speirs' vision of Crabbe and Austen is an enervated one: according to his terms, they are deprived of energy and agency. He is vague and limiting in his suggestion that the authors 'retain a respect for the forms and conventions of civilized society, even while being critical of them' (what kind of weight does 'being critical' carry here?). I shall posit for Austen and Crabbe a more active relation to 'cramping' and 'constricting' boundaries, one which tends to exploit them transformatively. The very fact of enclosure, I shall argue, has the paradoxical potential to be liberating for these writers.

Until the advent of the 1970s, little criticism of Jane Austen attended to the social context of her writing, or endeavoured to politicize it. Commentators such as Mary Lascelles, D.W. Harding, and Marvin Mudrick offered acute readings of the novels, but failed to ground them in their time.[21] Their versions of Austen's fiction were largely isolated from the broader political designs of the

period, although books such as Frank Bradbrook's *Jane Austen and her Predecessors* opened out to note literary influences and precursors.[22] But Austen's reading matter was essentially confined to literary productions, and her awareness of contemporary social issues kept to a minimum. This failure – or refusal – to historicize preserved the familiar and comfortable image of Jane Austen as a writer who knew her artistic limitations, and who deliberately kept herself away from the political issues of her day. Her three or four families in a country village were cut off from the outside world. However, we know from just her letters that she was familiar with books such as Captain Pasley's *An Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire* (1810), which she read with gusto, and there is evidence in her novels that she was familiar with some of the economic and agricultural pamphlets that were published during the Napoleonic Wars.[23] To contextualize Austen, therefore, does not (as some critics, such as Roger Gard, maintain) reduce in any way the importance of her aesthetic achievement; rather, it allows us to understand it better. Fresh historicizing challenges the critic and makes us revitalize aesthetic criteria. Austen's art, like any other, is formed partly in reaction to pressures beyond itself. Nor does Harold Bloom's very recent claim hold true, that historicists are 'critics who believe all of us to be overdetermined by societal history'.[24] To consider a work of art in its social and historical context, to see the ways in which other vocabularies and discourses bring life to it and become (to paraphrase Eliot) renewed, transfigured, in another pattern, is not necessarily to be 'overdetermined by societal history'.

The two most important works of criticism published in the 1970s on Austen (which paved the way for more recent political interpretations) were Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate* and Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Both critics adopt a broadly historicist approach to Austen, locating her for the first time in the context of the political debates of the 1790s. Butler and Duckworth both discover 'conservative' (in the Burkean sense of the word) tendencies in Austen's fiction, an interpretation fiercely contested by later feminist critics and cultural materialists, who argued for a more 'radical' Austen.

Duckworth begins with the supposition that the estate was, in Austen's period, a historical and political fabric continuous with the larger political scene of the time. His main tenet, drawing on Burke's anxious use of metaphor in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), is that 'essential to the continuity of an ethos is the actual physical disposition of its setting'.[25] The material disruption occasioned by the theatricals in Mansfield Park, therefore, is more than simply the temporary removal of furniture; it is a significant threat to the ethos of Sir Thomas Bertram's estate. As such, in Duckworth's reading, it is closely akin to that other form of spatial irresponsibility in the novel, the excessive 'improvement' of the estate promoted so vigorously by such characters as Henry Crawford and Mr Rushworth. As Duckworth observes, a certain degree of proper improvement is necessary from time to time in order that, as with a political state, 'cultural atrophy [...] be avoided' (p. 48). This is the kind of improvement which respects 'the character of the whole while repairing the deficiency of the part' (p. 58). Thus Edmund, resisting Crawford's excessive plans for a wholesale makeover of

Thornton Lacey, goes only so far as to allow that the farmyard should "'be moved [...] The house is by no means bad, and when the yard is removed, there may be a very tolerable approach to it'".[26] Edmund strikes the right balance between preservation and change. To be contrasted with this is the kind of 'improvement' better described as 'alteration' or 'innovation', which (Duckworth suggests) Austen associated with such 'radical' landscape gardeners as Humphry Repton. Duckworth makes the valuable distinction:

> To 'improve' was to treat the deficient or corrupt parts of an established order with the character of the whole in mind; to 'innovate' or 'alter', on the other hand, was to destroy all that had been built up by the 'collected reason of ages'.
> (pp. 46-47)

'Alteration' is a form of change alien to the integrity of any given structure, and which threatens to 'infect' an established ethos. Thus it should come as no surprise that the spirit of innovation which characterizes the production of *Lovers' Vows* arrives as an 'infection' from Ecclesford, carried by the reprehensible John Yates.

In his discussion of improvement, Duckworth traces the overlap between the aesthetic (the improvement of the estate in landscape gardening) and the moral (the improvement of self, as in Emma Woodhouse's attempts to alter the character of Harriet Smith). The term 'improvement', however, also has economic connotations. One of the first definitions offered by the *OED* for 'improvement' employs the language of 'turning', which will accrue significance as my monograph proceeds: 'The turning of land to better account, the reclamation of waste or unoccupied land by inclosing and bringing it into cultivation'. As a verb, 'to improve' is 'to turn *land* to profit; to inclose and cultivate (waste land)'. Interestingly, the *OED* suggests that this sense merges with another, which is more ambiguous: 'To advance or raise to a better quality or condition; to bring into a more profitable or desirable state; to increase the value or excellence of; to make better; to better, ameliorate'. Both landscape gardening and enclosure are forms of improvement that seek to 'increase the value' of land, to 'better' its potential through controlled management.

Even more than Duckworth's account, Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* demonstrates the extent to which Austen's fiction was implicated in the political debates of the 1790s. Butler shows convincingly how Austen's novels may be said to bear the imprint of conservative, Burkean thought, and how they were written very much in reaction to their political climate. The problem with her discussion, however, is its theoretical inflexibility. As with Duckworth, one gets the sense that at moments Butler is forcing the novels to meet her own ideological criteria. One can see from the work of Margaret Kirkham, for example, that Austen's fiction can be made to fit more than one political mould; one can argue with equal legitimacy for a 'radical' Austen as much as for a 'Tory' one. Austen can be both rebel and reactionary; her fiction can be said both to embrace bourgeois structures and equally to subvert them. I would argue that Austen's fiction is neither 'for' nor 'against' the conservative position, and to force it into

either category is to clamp down on its possibilities and misrepresent it. This monograph will strive towards a more subtle accommodation of Crabbe and Austen.

Part of the problem of Butler's account is its exclusive turn of phrase, which refuses to admit of other possibilities. So Austen's novels 'belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative'.[27] And again: 'Scott's mature work evolved naturally out of German progressive writing; that of his great English contemporary, Jane Austen, belonged squarely to the reaction against it' (p. 120); 'squarely', like 'decisively', blocks out other interpretive possibilities. Butler's specific readings of *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* I also contest in places, and indeed the interpretations offered in this study evolve partly out of this disagreement. With regard to *Mansfield Park*, Butler finds that the conservative ideology informing the text (more overtly than in the other novels) presents major structural problems. Additionally, she feels that the character of Fanny actually weakens the novel's overall aesthetic achievement: 'To some extent Fanny's is a negation of what is commonly meant by character'; and 'at centre Fanny is impossible' (pp. 247-48). Chapter Four offers a new approach to the question of Fanny's characterization, which remains a problem for many readers. It argues for a more positive reading of Austen's heroine, and suggests 'at the centre', in fact, Fanny is entirely plausible.

This study will also depart quite substantially from Butler's reading of *Emma*, particularly in terms of how she represents the interior life. One of the main contentions of Chapters Three and Four is that the work of Crabbe and Austen finds value in the capacity of the individual to fall back independently on inner resources. Butler's case is at odds with mine here. She argues that in *Emma* 'all forms of inwardness and secrecy tend to be anti-social. There is a moral obligation to live outside the self, in honest communication with others' (p. 258). And she urges one of the reasons why *Persuasion* marks a strikingly formal break with the earlier novels, is because Austen came 'to treat the inner life for the first time with unreserved sympathy', something that 'required her to rethink her form' (p. 290). The 'inner life', or 'inwardness', in the earlier *Emma* is therefore to be treated with suspicion. But it might be noted that 'inwardness' and 'secrecy' are not the only forms of inner life available to Austen's heroines. Some kinds are treated more positively than others. For example, the interior resolve of Mr Knightley is far removed from the inward duplicity of Frank Churchill. Additionally, inwardness need not exist in opposition to the desire 'to live outside the self' (which might itself be harmful if taken to excess). Churchill, again, is inward (secretive, withdrawn) but at the same time lives damagingly 'outside the self' in the sense of 'outside its properly containing bounds'. His immoderate lifestyle causes him to move beyond the limits of his selfhood, even as he shrinks deceptively within them. Mr Knightley, although very differently, also has a self-centred disposition that is not incompatible with the ability to 'live outside the self'. Just as his form of interiority testifies to self-reliance rather than duplicity, so his sallyings forth beyond the confines of his selfhood are 'in honest communication with others', rather than in pursuit of excessive pleasures.

The historian Warren Roberts' *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*, published four years after Butler's groundbreaking study and continuing her

contextual enterprise, is perhaps the only critical work which significantly engages with the notion that Austen's art was in part shaped by the Napoleonic conflict. In his chapter on 'War', Roberts observes the lack of direct reference to military matters in either her novels or her letters;[28] but his central contention is that Austen was, in fact, fully cognizant of the war's progress through her perusal of contemporary newspapers, and through correspondence with her brothers, Frank and Charles, both of whom fought as naval officers during the war; but that this awareness proved too close to home for her, and was therefore removed to the affective distance made possible by irony. Roberts' reading is constrained, however, by its overly biographical emphases, and by the rather hoary psychological model that it leans upon. Irony, for Roberts, seems merely to have the function of sublimating anxious or unwelcome feeling. The valuable contexts which he constructs – in quoting extensively from contemporary periodicals such as the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Critical Review* – are not used in the service of promoting a particular reading of Austen's work. Rather, all that Roberts establishes is that Austen did, contrary to popular opinion, follow carefully the progress of the war; but that evidence for this concern in her writing has to be uncovered, concealed as it is by her protective irony. Roberts' chapter painstakingly works through Austen's *corpus*, particularly the letters, and notes both her direct and oblique references to war; but this methodology fails to address the question of just *how* Austen's work is reactive. What do these references and allusions tell us about Austen's attitude toward economic and military matters? What is the aesthetic effect in the novels of these allusions? Butler's handling of context is much more adroit: historical materials are placed by her in the service of luminous close readings (even though, as I have shown, those readings do have attendant ideological problems); the marriage of text and context is fruitful. With Roberts, however, the connection between text and context is never made clear; there is something jarring about the way they are brought together, and the historical details are not allowed to illuminate Austen's fiction.

The conservative Austen constructed by Duckworth, Butler and Roberts has been sharply called into question by a number of dissenting critics, who have found much more radical tendencies in Austen's fiction, the most recent example being Edward Neill.[29] Feminists such as, most notably, Mary Poovey, Mary Evans and Margaret Kirkham have sought to deconstruct Austen's conventionally Tory image. Evans' account, in particular, is characterized by considerable theoretical sophistication, and yet it still claims rather naively at the outset that 'the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars are virtually absent' from Austen's fiction.[30] Her reading of *Mansfield Park*, Austen's 'most fully ideological novel' (p. 26), emphasizes the subversive potential of the text. She focuses on the complex links made in it between materiality and morality, arguing that its 'radical message' is that 'the ownership of property is not in any sense a guide to the moral worth of the individual' (p. 28). This is a valid point, and indicates how *Mansfield Park* does have the potential to be radically interpreted; but Evans then goes on to suggest that in the later fiction, the moral and the material realm become almost estranged from each other: