

Part II

Love in Jane Austen's Novels

A Preface to Chapters 8–11

Note: Three of the next four essays were part of an 80-page monograph called Jane Austen on Love, which was published in 1978 in the English Literary Monographs Series, at the University of Victoria in Canada. Although not widely distributed, that little book has done well in its way, and parts of it have been anthologized, for instance in the Modern Critical Interpretations series under the general editorship of Harold Bloom. It has been out of print for some time now, so I am glad of the chance to give it a new lease of life in this volume of my essays.

The last essay, on the "Women in Love," is new; and its addition to the others will mark some progress in my thinking on feminist issues.

A graduate student in my course on the novel some years ago – she was better read though less guarded than many of her contemporaries – produced this critical comment after rereading the chapters on Marianne's desertion by Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*: "Oh, Mrs. McMaster, I just cried and cried."¹ And a male colleague of mine once admitted that he found Elizabeth Bennet more sexually stimulating than the centre-fold of *Playboy*. I cite these two not altogether academic responses to Jane Austen's work as evidence for what will be my main arguments in the following chapters: that Jane Austen, knowing satirist and beautifully controlled comic artist though she is, is far from deficient in feeling; and that, notwithstanding her spinsterhood and her vaunted determination not to stray in subject-matter beyond the limits of her own experience, she is acutely awake to sex, and quite able to convey sexual feeling even though she may not take us into bedrooms.

Her novels are centrally concerned with courtship, and their culmination is marriage: for such a novelist Charlotte Brontë's contention that "the Passions are perfectly unknown to her,"² and Lawrence's strictures on her as an old maid "knowing in apartness,"³ are serious charges. Yet the charges continue to reverberate – in the comic count of the total sixteen kisses in the six novels (none of them between a man and a woman), and in the popular conception of her as a writer

whose most passionate encounters are conversations at a tea party or a walk to the vicarage.⁴ Even many of her admirers are ready to admit that though she is a great novelist, it is not to Jane Austen that we should go if we want to be deeply moved: she is great for other reasons. I am ready to admit numbers of reasons for which she is a great novelist; but I find no need to apologise for her in the area of her main concern. My contention is that her subject was love, and she knew her subject.

Notes

1. Contrast Annabella Milbanke on another novel: she wrote on reading *Pride and Prejudice* on its first emergence: "It is not a crying book, but the interest is very strong, especially for Mr. Darcy." The woman who was susceptible to Mr. Darcy two years later married Lord Byron. See Marghanita Laski, *Jane Austen and her World* (London: Thames and Hudson), p. 86.
2. Letter to G.H. Lewes, 12 January 1848. See *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 128. I shall be returning to Charlotte Brontë's charges in Chapter IX.
3. See "Apropos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" (1930).
4. See, for instance, Marjorie Proops: "Jane, the spinster daughter of a country Tory parson, . . . ignored sex. At any rate, she threw a discreet veil over it. . . . She was a deeply religious woman and the physical consummation of love appeared to be outside her comprehension." *Pride, Prejudice and Proops* (London, 1975), pp. 11–12. Marjorie Proops can hardly be considered an expert on Jane Austen (she calls Darcy D'arcy, and thinks Jane Fairfax married Willoughby); but her silly little book is an interesting compendium of the popular modern clichés about Jane Austen.