

The Portrayal of Approach to Commerce through the Light of Jane Austen's Works in English Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to portray the approach to commerce through the light of Jane Austen's works in English literature. Various approaches to commerce are presented by Jane Austen in her works. Her works have narrated that an entity was unavoidably affected by the pressures of a trade life. She has focused the life and the profession through different angles. Her brother, who was related to banking, was also portrayed. She has revealed the character's entrepreneurial thoughts and relevance with the business. She has mentioned the financial struggles of the characters that caused due to economic crisis. Her works have revealed the business-related problems of Sanditon. Thus, through various narrations; Jane Austen has focused the approach to commerce in her works.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century English Literature, Civilization, Profession, Trade, Commerce, Financial Struggle.*

Introduction

William Blake, an employed engraver, was unavoidably affected by the pressures of a trade life. However, those in better financial and social circumstances found it simpler to hide from what was happening around them. The extent to which Jane Austen leaves out major historical events from her works is a recurring point of criticism. However, she is rather typical in this regard. She is not unique in her assumption of the values of rural gentlemen whose incomes are derived from either rentals or government securities. Her family encouraged clergymen and naval officers, two vocations that allowed for some social mobility up the social ladder. Henry, her favourite brother, was a banker; therefore, he was undoubtedly active in the business. She visited him frequently in London and profited from his professional and social connections. He appears to have had an excessively enterprising mentality. He reportedly became impatient with the postillion of a post chaise he was riding in because it was moving too slowly through a winding country road. "Get on, boy! get on, will you?" he shouted. — 'I do get on, sir, where I can.' — 'You stupid fellow! Any fool can do that. I want you to get on where you can't.'"¹

Even while this attitude is not quite what one would expect from a bank director, he may have gotten by just fine during prosperous economic times. Although his bank suffered from the depression that engulfed Britain after the end of the Napoleonic War, it did not help him get through it. He returned to the family norm and took religious orders after it failed. Until her last finished book, *Persuasion*, there are few hints of this new, busy and nervous world. Even then, the financial struggles of Sir Walter Elliot, which are caused by an economic crisis, are blamed on his foolishness rather than the nation's status. But in the story she was working on right before she passed away, Sanditon's business problems are finally prominently included. The scene is that of a typical project of the time, converting a sleepy seaside community into a vacation destination. The entrepreneur, Mr. Parker, is described as "a complete Enthusiast" by Austen, who is undoubtedly aware of the negative connotations that the word carried throughout the eighteenth century.

Sanditon—the success of Sanditon as a small, fashionable Bathing natural advantages in its position and some accidental circumstances having suggested to himself, and the other principal Land Holder, the probability of its becoming a profitable Speculation, they had engaged in it, and planned and built, and praised and puffed, and raised it to something of young renown—and Mr. Parker could now think of very little besides.²

In the beginning of the story, Mr. Parker is looking for a doctor to add to Sanditon's facilities, and he enjoys the unintended economic benefits of his venture:

“Civilization, Civilization indeed!” cried Mr. P, delighted. “Look my dear Mary—Look at William Heeley’s windows. —Blue Shoes, and nankin Boots! —Who would have expected such a sight at a Shoemaker’s in old Sanditon! —This is new within the Month. There was no blue Shoe when we passed this way a month ago. —Glorious indeed! —Well, I think I have done something in my Day.”³

Austen's Literature in a World of Gentlefolk

The fact that most of Austen's literature is set in a world of gentlefolk, where anyone might claim to be, as Elizabeth Bennet did to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the daughter of a gentleman, is not surprising given her apparent disinterest in the claims made by business to advance humankind. Of course, Lady Catherine retorted that Elizabeth’s father might be a gentleman, “but who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts?”⁴ And the answer was that they were engaged in trade, which nobody wanted to admit carelessly.

Gentry Status of the Gardiner

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen is concerned with presenting Elizabeth's uncle Gardiner as a very gentlemanly man. According to David Hume's *History of England*, which Austen may have learned, Mr. Darcy treats him equally. Mr. Darcy's family arrived in England in 1066 with William the Conqueror. His source of income, however, is an unnamed City of London business. He can take a tour of the north for a month while he is away from it. The Gardiners qualified for gentry’s status. If not his aunt, the prudent Mr. Darcy found that to be sufficient. Austen gives hardly the slightest consideration to Mr. Gardiner's business activities or the characteristics of Sir Thomas Bertram's land in Antigua. In the distance, a ship bound for the West Indies can be seen, as well as a city office. She is aware of how people performed in Austen's time, and Mr. Gardiner did better than most of them.

It is possible that Austen considered the repulsive Mrs. Elton in *Emma* to be a better representation of the Gardiners. She is mentioned initially as Miss Augusta Hawkins, younger daughter “of a Bristol—merchant, of course, he must be called.” The word suppressed is “tradesman,” connecting her with the ‘rude mechanicals’ of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* rather than with merchants of Venice. Even though Mrs. Elton was much more comfortable in Highbury society than Bottom the Weaver was at the court of Theseus, she made roughly the same mistakes in her understanding of proper manners for gentlefolk as he did. She doesn’t understand, for instance, that while a gentleman may refer to another by his last name alone, it is not appropriate for a woman to do the same.

“Never seen him in her life before [exclaims Emma] and call him Knightley! and discover him to be a gentleman! A little upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr. E., and her carosposo, and her resources, and all her airs of pert pretension and underbred finery. Actually, to discover that Mr. Knightley is a gentleman! I doubt whether he will return the compliment, and discover her to be a lady.”⁵

However, even the families of Bristol’s dubious merchants are not above social vice. Selina Suckling, a reasonably wealthy Bristolian and the sister of Mrs. Elton, is troubled by some troublemakers named Tupman who have moved into the area.

“How they got their fortune nobody knows. They came from Birmingham, which is not a place to promise much, you know, Mr. Weston. One has not great hopes from Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound.”⁶

Economic Point of View and Approaches

Regarding the abysses of indiscernibility suggested here, Austen leaves us to make educated guesses, but no one knows or cares how the Tupmans made their riches in Birmingham. If one consults the pertinent section of Robert Southey’s 1807 *Letters from England*, which focuses on Birmingham, one can comprehend the city’s reputation for being ominous. Don Manuel Alvares Espriella, a Spanish traveler, is credited with writing this work, and Southey apparently found the persona liberating because it allowed him to observe English life with a clever directness that would have been challenging for a local. Birmingham, according to Don Manuel, is the most revolting city he has ever been to. It is incredibly noisy and dirty and has dirt that “penetrates everywhere, spotting and staining everything, and getting into the pores and nostrils.” I feel as if my throat wanted sweeping like an English chimney.” However, the Spaniard argues that because work in Birmingham is precarious and subject to market fluctuations, widespread dishonesty is nearly tolerable. ⁷ The products are frequently of poor quality, and illegal activities—including counterfeiting the currencies of all the nations with which England conducts business—are done with impunity. The Tupmans, Mr. Suckling’s unfavourable neighbours, undoubtedly struck luckily and managed to flee while their good fortune persisted.

Don Manuel is not the only commercial district in Birmingham that has let Birmingham down. Manchester also disgusts him, but mainly because of how children are treated as enslaved people in the cotton factory there. He observes the ‘unnatural dexterity’ with which these young victims carry out their tasks while himself becomes slightly unsteady from the constant noise

and movement. One shift works from five in the morning until six at night, when the night shift takes over, the owner explains: “the wheels never stand still.” When Don Manuel continues,

he told me there was no rest in these walls, day nor night, if Dante had peopled one of his hells with children, here was a scene worthy to have supplied him with new images of torment.⁸

He is horrified by the demoralizing impact this life must have on the kids and the actual brutality it would subject them to.

They are deprived in childhood of all instruction and enjoyment; of the sports in which childhood instinctively indulges, fresh air by day and natural sleep by night. Their health physical and moral are alike destroyed; they die of diseases induced by unremitting task work, by confinement in the impure atmosphere of crowded rooms, by the particles of metallic or vegetable dust which they are continually inhaling; or they live to grow up without decency, without comfort, and without hope, without morals, without religion, and without shame, and bring forth slaves like themselves to tread in the same path of misery.⁹

The owner is a lovely and decent man who is unaware of the harm he is doing to this generation. Don Manuel thought of cities in Arabian romance where all the inhabitants were enchanted:

“Here Commerce is the queen witch, and I had no talisman strong enough to disenchant those who were daily drinking of the golden cup of her charms.”¹⁰

In a later letter, this critique of the commercial attitude is expanded to cover the entire fifty-year development of English society. Everything is poisoned by the business ethos: “literature, arts, religion, government are alike tainted.”

“Field has been joined to field; a moneyed farmer comes, like Aaron’s rod, and swallows up all within his reach”, the proverb says of how trade speculation has turned agriculture into a commodity. Even while agriculture has improved, there has been a significant social upheaval. There is too much money and too much poverty across the country:

“Were there less of the one there would be less of the other.” And the solution?
“Taxation might be so directed as to break down the great properties.”¹¹

Some twenty years later, in his *Colloquies of Society*, Southey takes substantially the same position (1829). The freeing figure in this story is Sir Thomas More, who examines the Protestant Reformation in great detail, as is only natural for a Catholic martyr. It has, he says, “prepared the way for the uncontrolled dominion of that worldly spirit which it is the tendency of the commercial system to produce and foster.”¹²

Above all, in England, Mammon has established an unquestionable and recognized hegemony. Southey, who appears as More’s dialogue partner in this book under the name Montesinos, notes that Britain could not have defeated France in the past war without the ‘manufacturing system.’ But more dismisses this criticism. Evil can only result in eviler. Everyone involved in

modern manufacturing is a lower being. People are compelled to work under unhealthy situations and “any result would be dearly purchased at such an expense of human misery and degradation.”¹³

Sir Thomas and Montesinos continue by defining ‘manufactures’ and ‘commerce.’ These merchants can still be seen today. The merchants of ancient Tyre and the medieval Moors were deserving benefactors of the government and the arts. Although it is uncommon, merchants should be included in the list of liberal professions because they demand the most comprehensive knowledge and offer excellent possibilities for expanding it.¹⁴ As is sometimes the case in Southey's writings, this explicit capitulation to business society is not precisely defined. Still, one may assume he has in mind individuals like William Roscoe of Liverpool, a banker, or perhaps the directors of the East India Company. Southey sees the most promise for the future in the designs of Robert Owen, one of the most prosperous manufacturers of his era, which further complicates matters.

Not that Owen appears in the Colloquies in the capacity of a cotton manufacturer. Southey only mentions him in the context of his charitable work as the creator of the well-known cooperative association plan, which he feels would significantly improve many working classes if it could only gather the required funds. But alas! The Bible Society has far greater success in stimulating contributions than the eloquent Robert Owen, and it is a pity he is so constrained by the secularism which he insists on proffering to an unappreciative public.¹⁵

Conclusion

An approach to commerce through Jane Austen's works in English literature has been presented in this article. Her works have shown how the demands of a trade life unavoidably harm an entity. She has looked at her life and profession from several angles. Her brother, who worked in banking, was also portrayed. She has revealed the character's business ideas and commercial significance. She alluded to the characters' financial struggles as a result of the economic downturn. Her works have revealed Sanditon's business problems. Thus, through various narrations, Jane Austen has concentrated on the attitude toward trade in her works.

References

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