International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Domestic Boundaries: Class, Gender, and the Economic Constraints of Regency England in Jane Austen's Antifeminist Lens

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Abstract
Jane Austen's novels, set against the backdrop of Regency England (c. 1795–1837), offer a nuanced portrayal of domestic life, where class hierarchies, gender expectations, and economic imperatives intersect to define individual agency. This paper argues that, contrary to popular feminist interpretations, Austen's works can be read through an antifeminist lens, one that ultimately reinforces patriarchal structures and domestic boundaries rather than subverting them. By examining key novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and *Mansfield Park* (1814), this analysis explores how Austen's satire and narrative resolutions uphold class stability, traditional gender roles, and marriage as an economic necessity, thereby limiting women's autonomy within the confines of societal norms. Drawing on historical context and scholarly debates, the paper contends that Austen's conservative leanings reflect the era's constraints, prioritizing social harmony over radical change.

Keywords: Regency England, Patriarchal structures ,Gender roles, Marriage (economic necessity), and Social harmony.

Introduction

The Regency era in England, spanning roughly from 1795 to 1837, was a period marked by rigid social hierarchies, evolving economic landscapes, and entrenched gender norms. Named after the Prince Regent (later George IV), who ruled in place of his ailing father, George III, this time witnessed the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the early stirrings of industrialization, which began to reshape class dynamics and economic opportunities. Within this context, literature served as a mirror to society, and few authors captured its intricacies as deftly as Jane Austen (1775–1817). Austen's six completed novels, published between 1811 and 1818, focus on the domestic sphere of the gentry and middle classes, where marriage, inheritance, and social mobility were paramount.

Austen is often hailed as a proto-feminist for her witty critiques of patriarchal society, highlighting women's limited options and the absurdities of courtship rituals. However, this paper posits an alternative reading: through an antifeminist lens, Austen's works ultimately affirm the domestic boundaries imposed by class, gender, and economics, rather than dismantling them. Her heroines, while intelligent and resilient, achieve happiness only by conforming to societal expectations, marrying within or above their class, and accepting economic dependencies. This interpretation aligns with scholarly arguments that Austen's rise in feminist criticism has paradoxically diminished her stature in some circles, as her

narratives resist radical feminist ideals. The thesis here is that Austen's antifeminist lens, characterized by satire that exposes but does not overthrow patriarchal norms, reflects and reinforces the Regency era's constraints, emphasizing stability over subversion.

Historical Context: Class, Gender, and Economics in Regency England

To understand the domestic boundaries portrayed in the novels of Jane Austen, it is essential to examine the historical milieu of Regency England (early nineteenth century). English society during this period was sharply stratified into three broad classes: the aristocracy, the middle class (including the landed gentry and professionals), and the lower classes consisting of laborers and servants. The aristocracy possessed extensive estates and considerable political influence, while the gentry and emerging professional classes sought to maintain or improve their social status through landownership, reputation, and advantageous marriages. Economic changes such as the Enclosure Acts and the gradual expansion of industrialization intensified class divisions, making upward mobility difficult and often dependent on inheritance or marital alliances.

Gender roles within this social structure were equally restrictive. English law operated under the principle of coverture, which meant that a married woman's legal identity was absorbed into that of her husband. As a result, women lost control of their property and financial independence upon marriage. These limitations were gradually modified only later through legislation such as the Married Women's Property Act 1870 and the Married Women's Property Act 1882, but during Austen's lifetime women had very few legal protections. Unmarried women often faced economic insecurity, with limited respectable professions available, most commonly positions as governesses, companions, or teachers. Education for girls emphasized accomplishments such as music, drawing, and polite conversation rather than intellectual or professional development, preparing them primarily for roles as wives and mothers.

Within this social environment, the "marriage market" functioned as a key economic institution. Dowries, property settlements, and family connections often determined marital arrangements, making marriage both a social and financial contract. Romantic affection was frequently secondary to considerations of stability and status. These realities shaped the everyday experiences of women in Regency society and strongly influenced the themes explored in contemporary literature.

Austen's novels reflect this historical reality. Drawing upon her own experiences within the provincial gentry, Austen depicted the tensions between personal desire and social expectations. Her works, including *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility,* and *Mansfield Park*, critique aspects of class privilege, gender inequality, and economic dependency through irony and satire. Yet the resolutions of these narratives generally occur within the established social framework, emphasizing propriety, marriage, and economic prudence.

Understanding this historical context helps illuminate how Austen's fiction both reflects and subtly reinforces the domestic boundaries that shaped Regency society.

Class Hierarchies in Austen's Novels

Austen's works vividly depict class as a domestic boundary, limiting interactions and aspirations. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet family's entailment, where the estate passes to a male heir, exposes the vulnerability of women in a class system reliant on primogeniture. Mrs. Bennet anxiously explains that "the estate is entailed away from the female line" (Austen 33), revealing how property laws privilege male inheritance and leave women economically insecure. Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr. Collins

underscores class tensions and the pressure of socially advantageous marriage. However, her eventual marriage to Mr. Darcy elevates her status without fundamentally challenging the social hierarchy. As the narrator remarks about Darcy's wealth and position, he is "a man of large fortune in Derbyshire" (Austen 6), emphasizing the importance of rank and property in determining social value.

Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters' disinheritance forces them into genteel poverty, highlighting how class mobility for women depends largely on male benevolence or marriage. Their displacement occurs because "the Norland estate was limited to the male line" (Austen 4), which excludes the Dashwood women from inheritance. Consequently, their social standing becomes uncertain, demonstrating how economic stability for women in Austen's world is tied to patriarchal structures. Through these portrayals, Austen illustrates how class hierarchies operate within domestic life, shaping women's opportunities and reinforcing dependence on marriage as a means of security.

Mansfield Park offers a stark portrayal of class immobility. Fanny Price, adopted from a lower-class family, navigates the Bertram estate as an outsider, her humility and deference reinforcing class distinctions. When she first arrives at the Bertram household, the narrator notes her inferior social position: "Her education had been neglected… and she was almost as ignorant of the ways of the world as if she had never lived in it" (Austen 19). This observation highlights how Fanny's upbringing and lack of refinement mark her as socially inferior within the aristocratic environment of Mansfield.

Austen's satire often targets the moral laxity and superficiality of the upper class, particularly in the behavior of the Crawfords. Mary Crawford, for example, treats marriage lightly, remarking that "a large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of" (Austen 213). Through such statements, Austen critiques the materialistic attitudes prevalent among fashionable society. Yet the narrative ultimately rewards Fanny not for challenging the hierarchy but for her patience, morality, and respect for established norms. Her moral steadfastness is evident when she refuses Henry Crawford's proposal despite social pressure, declaring that she cannot love him and therefore cannot marry him (Austen 312).

Fanny's eventual marriage to Edmund Bertram affirms the existing social order rather than subverting it. The narrator concludes that Edmund finally recognizes "the sterling good of Fanny Price" (Austen 470), suggesting that virtue and obedience to moral propriety lead to social acceptance. Viewed through this lens, Austen's narrative reinforces class boundaries as part of a stable social structure, privileging harmony and moral conformity over radical social change.

In *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, gender functions as a social boundary that confines women largely to the domestic sphere. Austen's heroines embody the era's ideals of femininity, rationality balanced with sensibility in Elinor Dashwood, or wit tempered by decorum in Elizabeth Bennet. Yet these portrayals can be interpreted as antifeminist in their narrative outcomes, because female success ultimately depends on conforming to patriarchal expectations rather than dismantling them. Early in *Sense and Sensibility*, the narrator underscores the limited economic position of women by explaining that the Dashwood women are left dependent after the estate passes to a male heir, since "the Norland estate was limited to the male line" (Austen 4). This inheritance structure reveals how women's security relies on male authority and property.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, gender norms dictate that women must secure husbands for economic survival. Charlotte Lucas openly articulates this pragmatic view of marriage when she remarks, "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (Austen 86), explaining her willingness to marry Mr. Collins despite lacking affection. Austen's critique of rigid social expectations appears in Lady Catherine de Bourgh's outrage at Elizabeth Bennet's independence. Lady Catherine insists that Elizabeth must reject

Darcy, declaring, "Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (Austen 356). Although Elizabeth resists such aristocratic authority, the novel ultimately resolves its tensions through marriages that re-establish social and gender equilibrium.

A similar pattern appears in *Mansfield Park*, where Fanny Price's quiet obedience contrasts with Mary Crawford's confidence and social ambition. Mary expresses a pragmatic view of marriage when she observes that "a large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of" (Austen 213). The narrative, however, rewards Fanny's modesty and moral restraint rather than Mary's assertiveness. By the novel's conclusion, Edmund recognizes "the sterling good of Fanny Price" (Austen 470), affirming traditional feminine virtues such as patience, humility, and moral constancy.

While many feminist readings interpret Austen's subtle irony as empowering women, an antifeminist perspective suggests that her heroines' agency remains constrained by the need for social approval. Their independence is limited, and their ultimate fulfillment lies within marriage and domestic stability rather than social transformation.

Economic Constraints and the Marriage Market:

In *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, economics forms a central boundary within the domestic world, where marriage often functions as a financial necessity rather than a purely romantic union. In Regency England, women's limited inheritance rights and lack of independent income made matrimony essential for stability.

Sense and Sensibility clearly illustrates this reality when the Dashwood women are displaced after the death of Mr. Dashwood because "the Norland estate was limited to the male line" (Austen 4). Their sudden reduction in circumstances demonstrates how women's social and economic security depended largely on male inheritance or advantageous marriage. Consequently, Elinor and Marianne must navigate the marriage market carefully, seeking partners who can provide financial stability as well as emotional fulfillment.

Economic motives similarly drive the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. The potential scandal of Lydia Bennet's elopement with George Wickham threatens not only the family's reputation but also the marriage prospects of the other Bennet sisters. As the narrator explains, Lydia's actions could lead to "such a scandal as the whole party concerned in it would scarcely escape disgrace" (Austen 288). The crisis is ultimately resolved through Darcy's financial intervention, which secures Wickham's marriage to Lydia and restores the family's social standing. While Austen satirizes the mercenary aspects of marriage, the narrative resolution, Elizabeth's union with the wealthy Darcy, reinforces the idea that economic stability remains central to a successful match.

A similar pattern appears in *Mansfield Park*, where economic structures underpin social hierarchy. Sir Thomas Bertram's wealth is connected to his plantation in Antigua, subtly linking the domestic order of Mansfield to colonial economics.

Although the novel briefly acknowledges these economic foundations, it ultimately resolves tensions through Fanny Price's marriage to Edmund Bertram. By the conclusion, Fanny's rise in status occurs not through economic independence but through integration into the Bertram family. The narrator notes Edmund's recognition of "the sterling good of Fanny Price" (Austen 470), suggesting that virtue and moral propriety, rather than financial autonomy, secure her future.

Viewed through an antifeminist lens, Austen's narratives ultimately reaffirm the conservative social order. While her satire exposes the financial calculations underlying marriage, the novels conclude with

harmonious unions that preserve existing economic and gender hierarchies. Women achieve stability not through economic independence but through marriage, indicating that domestic happiness in Austen's world remains closely tied to patriarchal economic structures.

Jane Austen's Antifeminist Lens: Reinforcement Over Revolution

Debates surrounding the feminist implications of Jane Austen's fiction reveal a deep ambivalence among scholars. Feminist critics often praise Austen for exposing the limitations placed on women in Regency society, while antifeminist interpretations argue that her narratives ultimately reinforce patriarchal structures rather than dismantle them. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet appears to challenge social authority through her wit and independence, yet the narrative concludes with her marriage to Darcy, integrating her into the very social hierarchy she once questioned. Earlier in the novel, Elizabeth proudly declares her independence of judgment, stating, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness" (Austen 223). However, the resolution suggests that personal fulfillment is ultimately achieved through a socially approved marriage rather than through sustained independence.

Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the contrast between Marianne's emotional sensibility and Elinor's rational restraint reflects broader ideological values of the period. Marianne's excessive emotion is gradually corrected by experience and suffering, leading her to recognize the importance of moderation and social propriety. As the narrator observes, Marianne learns "to govern her feelings" (Austen 263), symbolizing the triumph of controlled reason, often associated with patriarchal order, over unrestrained emotional expression. The novel thus resolves its conflicts not through rebellion but through adaptation to established social expectations.

A comparable dynamic is evident in *Mansfield Park*, where the narrative strongly affirms traditional moral and social hierarchies. Fanny Price's quiet obedience and moral constancy are rewarded with social acceptance and marriage to Edmund Bertram. By the novel's conclusion, Edmund recognizes "the sterling good of Fanny Price" (Austen 470), reinforcing the value of humility, patience, and conformity to established norms. In contrast, characters such as Mary Crawford, who exhibit independence and social ambition, are ultimately marginalized by the narrative.

From this perspective, Austen's literary lens may be described as antifeminist in its subtle conservatism. While her satire exposes the constraints imposed on women, the resolutions of her novels reaffirm social boundaries rather than dismantle them. This apparent conservatism can be partly explained by Austen's historical context. Writing within the social framework of Regency England, where rapid social change could threaten established hierarchies, Austen's narratives emphasize social harmony and moral stability over radical transformation.

Consequently, her fiction critiques patriarchal structures but ultimately preserves them, privileging order and domestic stability above revolutionary change.

Conclusion

The novels of Jane Austen vividly portray the domestic boundaries that shaped life in Regency England, where class hierarchy, gender expectations, and economic limitations structured individual choices, especially those of women. Through works such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility,* and *Mansfield Park*, Austen illustrates how social order is maintained through marriage, inheritance, and adherence to established norms. Examined through an antifeminist lens, these narratives appear to

reinforce rather than dismantle the patriarchal framework of her society. Although Austen frequently exposes the flaws and inequalities embedded in these structures through satire and irony, her stories ultimately resolve conflicts in ways that restore social harmony rather than challenge it fundamentally.

Marriage, in particular, emerges as the central mechanism through which women achieve stability and recognition. Austen's heroines, whether Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, or Fanny Price, gain security not through independence but through integration into socially sanctioned relationships. Such resolutions suggest that while Austen was acutely aware of the restrictions placed upon women, she presented adaptation to these limitations as the most viable path within the social realities of her time.

Modern readers often interpret Austen as a proto-feminist writer because of her intelligent heroines and subtle critique of patriarchal attitudes. However, an antifeminist reading highlights the conservative dimension of her narratives, where critique exists alongside affirmation of the existing social order. Rather than advocating radical transformation, Austen's fiction prioritizes moral propriety, domestic harmony, and societal stability.

Consequently, Austen may be understood not simply as a feminist icon but as a perceptive observer of the social boundaries governing Regency life. Her novels capture the complexities of a world where personal aspirations must negotiate rigid structures of class, gender, and economy. This perspective deepens our appreciation of Austen's work by revealing how her narratives simultaneously critique and preserve the very systems they portray.

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