8 I am citing Marianne Dashwood's resolution, one which Austen certainly shows signs of taking to heart (SS 137).
9 In 'Jane Austen and the Look of Letters', Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Mary Favret argues for the importance of 'even finer' and 'close writing'. Since the recipients of a letter were usually required to pay postage upon delivery, letters needed to 'look as if they were worth the cost of postage', pp. 116–7.
10 See Favret on the importance of the post office for Jane Fairfax, pp. 158–64.
11 Le Faye, Jane Austen: A Family Record, pp. 198, 249.
12 'Preface to the Desobligeant', Sentimental Journey.
13 'I want to tell you that I have got my own darling Child from London', she reports after receiving her first copy of Pride and Prejudice (L. 203). Real babies do not inspire such rejoicing. Austen complains to Fanny Knight that Anna Austen Lefroy, pregnant again, has not a chance of escape... Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty. — I am very sorry for her, — Mrs Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many children' (336).
15 Le Faye, Jane Austen: A Family Record, p. 199.

7

JULIET MCMASTER

Class

We hear of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, one of the most memorable and least likeable characters in Jane Austen's novels, that 'she likes to have the distinction of rank preserved' (PP 162). The obsequious Mr. Collins enjoins her guest Elizabeth Bennet to dress simply, and not to emulate the elegant apparel of her high-ranking hostess: the differences in station are not only present, but must be seen to be present.

Class difference was of course a fact of life for Austen, and an acute observation of the fine distinctions between one social level and another was a necessary part of her business as a writer of realistic fiction. Nor would she have wished it away, although at the time of writing her novels, she herself — as the unmarried daughter of a deceased country clergyman, like Miss Bates — knew what it was to suffer from the class system. Her favourite niece, Fanny Knight, 'whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour' (E 375), was shamelessly patronizing after she married a lord, and said her aunt, but for the advantages she gained at Godmersham, would have been 'very much below par as to good Society and its ways'. In certain ways Austen was ideally placed to observe the finely nuanced social distinctions around her. As an unmarried woman she was to some extent outside the game (since women were assumed to take their status from their husbands) and hence could see the more of it. Moreover, she had different vantage points: she could alternate between her relatively humble position of living with her widowed mother and unmarried sister in the Chawton house by the grace and favour of her landlord brother, and visiting that brother's family at his country estate of Godmersham, and drinking French wine (a rare treat) with the opulent (L 139).

'There are far finer and more numerous grades of dignity in this country than in any other', claimed Edward Lytton Bulwer, who was growing up in England while Austen was writing her novels. He and other Victorians like Carlyle and Thackeray became excellent and explicit analysts of class and class difference in England; but Austen had already specialized in the
dramatizing of the nuances and intricacies of the subject. My procedure in
this essay will be first to turn snob myself, and erect a social ladder as she
represents it, with the personnel of her novels arranged on its rungs in order
of precedence; then to try to extract Austen’s own attitude to class
distinction, and the immense importance that some of her characters assign
to it.

Although in her own life Austen did have some dealings with royalty,
however mediated, when she was graciously invited to dedicate 
*Emma* to
the Prince Regent, she never presents royalty in her fiction, nor any of the
great aristocrats who still owned great tracts of the country, and were
prominent in its government. So we must start several rungs down the
ladder. Among the onstage characters (as opposed to those who are merely
mentioned), Lord Osborne in the fragment *The Watsons* is probably the one
with the highest rank in her fiction, and he is not much better than a fool.
The indications are that he will be sufficiently educated by the heroine to
learn to value her and to propose to her; but that she will turn him down
(MW 365). So much suggests that for Austen there is nothing divine about
royalty, and not much that is special about peers. In fact characters with
titles – or ‘handles to their names’, as the Victorians used to say – are seldom admirable in the novels. Sir Thomas Bertram, a baronet, is the best
of them, but even he overestimates his own status and his family’s importance. Sir
Walter Elliot’s obsession with his status and the Baronetage in which it is
published is made not only comic but contemptible. (In Sir Walter, Austen
anticipates the Victorian social criticism of Carlyle, who characterized the
aristocrat as ‘The Dandy’, obsessed with appearances, and sick with selfish
love.) Sir John Middleton, who is also presumably a baronet, is well
meaning but vacuous, with a ‘total want of talent and taste’ (SS 32). A
servant’s rendering of the title as ‘a baronet’ suggests that being a baronet
can be a somewhat benighted condition (P 106).

A baronetcy is an inherited title, passed down from father to son, a
knighthood, also signalled by the title ‘Sir’ attached to the first name, is
awarded for a particular service; since it is not hereditary, it carries less
prestige. Even a Mr. Lucas, ‘formerly in trade in Meryton’ (PP 18), can
become a ‘Sir William Lucas’ of Lucas Lodge, and introduce ‘St. James’s,
the palace where he received his knighthood, into every conversation. The
distinction [of being knighted] had perhaps been felt too strongly’, notes the
narrator drily (PP 18). A title, it seems, is almost always a guarantee of
futuressness in Austen’s fiction. ‘The Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple, as
her daughter, the Honourable Miss Carteret’, merely from the status
parade of their names, are almost bound to be the kind whose status is the
only attraction (P 148). So too with the Honourable John Yates, who
spends his time in solitary declamation as he rehearses the role of a baron
(MP 169). ‘Honourable’ is a courtesy title given to younger sons and
daughters of peers below the rank of Marquess.

Women too sometimes have handles to their names, although they could
not inherit a peerage or a baronetcy. Lady Catherine de Bourgh would not
want us to miss the fine shades in the title ‘Lady’. When it comes attached to
the first name – as with Lady Catherine, her sister Lady Anne Darcy, and
the unscrupulous Lady Susan Vernon – it signifies that the lady in question
has the title ‘in her own right’, as the daughter of an earl; she is thus ‘to the
manner born’, as the expression goes, and she retains her title irrespective of
her husband’s status. Lady Bertram of Mansfield Park, however, along with
Lady Middleton, Lady Russell of Persuasion, and Lady Denham of
Sanditon, whose titles are attached only to the last name, hold them only by
virtue of being married to a baronet or knight; and the lady would lose it if
she were remarried to a plain ‘Mr.’ In such circles, such things matter.

Lady Anne Darcy is married to plain Mr. Darcy, and Lady Catherine
makes a point of Darcy’s family as being ‘untitled’. It is nevertheless
‘respectable, honorable, and ancient’, and Darcy’s fortune, at £10,000 a
year, is ‘splendid’ (PP 356). The long-established but untitled landowning
family does seem to gather Austen’s deep respect, especially if its income
comes from land and a rent-roll; and her two most eligible heroes, Mr.
Darcy of Pemberley and Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey, come from this
class, the landed gentry. So does Mr. Rushworth of Sotherton, however,
who despite his long rent-roll is morally and intellectually not worth much
more than his name signifies.

Austen is often happy to follow the Cinderella plot, and to make a happy
ending out of marrying her heroine to a man notably above her in income
and social prestige. The landowning country gentleman is as close to a
prince as her heroines approach. As to income, they usually follow, in effect
if not in intention, the prudent advice of Tennyson’s ‘Northern Farmer’:
‘Deat thou marry for munny, but g0a wheer munny is!’ Elizabeth’s initial
rejection of Darcy usefully assures us that she is not marrying him for his
£10,000 a year. But she half-jokingly admits that her love has been
influenced by ‘his beautiful grounds at Pemberley’ (373). Money is only one
of a number of factors that count, however.

Elizabeth’s marriage to Darcy is the greatest ‘match’ in the novels, and
Mrs. Bennet has every right to rejoice in it. But we have different views on
the extent of the social disparity between them. In Lady Catherine’s eyes
Elizabeth is a nobody, with ‘upstart pretensions’, a woman shockingly
on the make, who will pollute ‘the shades of Pemberley’ (356-7). Elizabeth herself,
however, is not overwhelmed by the social difference. ‘He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal,’ she claims calmly (356). Austen seems to approve of this relative flattening of the degrees of distinction above the country gentry. But she notes too, with irony, the tendency to be acutely aware of the degrees of distinction in the scale below. Emma Woodhouse is enraged that Mr. Elton should ‘look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself showing no presumption in addressing her!’ (F 156). Emma too has a vivid sense of the gradations below.

The country gentleman, who leads a leisurely existence and who subsists on income from land and inheritance, is at his best the moral and social ideal as a partner for a heroine. But the condition takes some living up to; Austen, like other social commentators, insists that with the privileges go extensive responsibilities. Elizabeth freezes Darcy off when he is proud and pretentious; but she warns to him when she discovers how as master of Pemberley he uses his extensive power for the good of those around him.

The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! … Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character. (PP 250-1)

*Emma* strikes us as a glowing and optimistic comedy partly because the hero Mr. Knightley stands highest in the moral as well as the social scale; he lives, after all, at ‘Donwell’ Abbey.

The *Highbury of Emma* is close to presenting a microcosm of Austen’s social world. Here, from Mr. Knightley (whose knightly moral status is expressed in his name rather than a literal title) to the poor family to which Emma dispenses charity, we have assembled nearly all the levels of society that Austen presents. Moreover, the novel’s heroine is one who specializes in social discrimination, and makes prompt though often inaccurate judgments about the social station of the people around her. I will use *Emma*, therefore, to provide the main example of the levels of the social ladder, while drawing freely on examples from the other novels as well.

Highest in the Highbury circle, then, is Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey, the first in virtue as in place. Austen insists that part of his virtue is that he refuses to trade on his rank. He walks, when status-conscious people like the Osbornes in *The Watsons* would make a point of riding in a carriage. When he does get out his carriage, it is to transport Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, not himself. Though he could leave the management of his estate to an employee, he takes an active interest, is often in conference with his steward William Larkins, and is warmly interested in the domestic affairs of his tenant farmer, Robert Martin. In *Persuasion*, by contrast, we are invited to consider the derogation of such duties by the bad landlord, Sir Walter Elliot, who is consequently exiled from his estate, and even leaves the farewells to his daughter (P 39). Sir Walter is enraptured by the prestige of his position, but neglects the responsibilities.

Next in status in *Highbury* is Mr. Woodhouse of Hartfield. Hartfield is a gentleman’s residence, and it has a farm attached; but Mr. Woodhouse clearly has nothing to do with its management, and we hear of no tenants. The fact that Emma has a fortune of £50,000 suggests that much of his income comes from investment rather than from land: hence his status is relatively lower than Knightley’s. Mr. Bennet of Longbourn in *Pride and Prejudice* and old Mr. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* also belong in this category. Though gentlemen of property, and owners of estates, they lack the long-term commitment to the land that makes good stewards and moral aristocrats of Darcy and Knightley.

One might suppose that the siblings in a single family would be almost by definition of the same rank. But even here there are marked differences in status, not only between sons and daughters, but also between one son and another. The aristocracy and the inheritance of land depended heavily on the system of primogeniture. Just as only the eldest son can inherit a peerage, so the bulk of land would normally descend by the same system. The entail, so prominent in *Pride and Prejudice*, legally formalizes this customary practice of inheritance. If an estate were divided equally between all siblings, as our understanding of equitable practice would suggest today, the estate would be dispersed, and would ultimately cease to exist. The system of primogeniture, which unfairly privileges one family member by accumulating all property in his hands, was developed as an arrangement for the preservation of the family name and the family estate through the generations. Austen highlights the injustices of this system of inheritance. At the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility* the narrator informs us how a rich old gentleman, Mr. Dashwood, so ties up both his money and his estate that it must stay in the male line, and may not be alienated to the girls of the family, even though the son is already amply provided for. ‘Wife and daughters’ are deprived; and the estate and the money as well must descend ‘to his son, and his son’s son’ (SS 4).

Hence there is a considerable difference in prestige and expectation between elder sons and younger sons, as between sons and daughters. Austen notices this, and dramatizes it; but not without conveying a strong sense of the inequity of such arrangements. The five Bennet girls are to be
turned out of Longbourn when their father dies, since the estate is entailed on a distant male cousin, Mr. Collins, who shows precious little sign of being morally worthy of it. Even among these five girls, too, there are notable shades of difference in prestige. Jane, the eldest, is called 'Miss Bennet', while her younger sisters are referred to as 'Miss Eliza', 'Miss Mary', and so on. The elder may be 'out' in society before the younger, and should be, according to Lady Catherine; but in this matter, in this family, equity prevails. 'I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters', says Elizabeth, 'that they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. — The last born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth, as the first' (PP 165). Once married, a sister gains prestige over a sister, whatever her place in the age sequence. 'Lord! how I should like to be married before any of you', Lydia tells her elder sisters ingenuously; 'and then I would chaperone you about to all the balls' (223). And presently — though not without some moral sacrifice — she gains her wish, and takes pride of place at table at her mother's right hand, saying to her eldest sister, 'Aha! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman' (317).

Among the brothers at this level of society the difference is even greater. The eldest, who can expect to inherit the estate and the income that goes with it, if not a title as well, is often bred to idleness; and Austen shows how such expectations can make him spoil and frivolous, like Frederick Tilney in Northanger Abbey and Tom Bertram in Mansfield Park. A younger son, like Henry Tilney or Edmund Bertram, who has his living to earn, is sympathetically treated, and becomes a suitable mate for his heroine. Mary Crawford has every intention of marrying an elder brother, and is so discontented with herself for falling in love with Edmund by mistake that she wishes his elder brother dead (MP 434). Edward Ferrars, who is an elder son by birth but not by temperament, chafes at the idleness expected of him. 'Instead of having anything to do, instead of having any profession chosen for me, or being allowed to chuse any myself, I returned home to be completely idle' (SS 362). His mother, the rich and powerful Mrs. Ferrars (one wishes Austen would sometimes show a powerful woman in a favourable light!) in effect turns him into a younger son (at least economically speaking), by transferring all her money to his younger brother Robert, who relishes idleness. Edward turns to making his living as a country parson.

So much suggests that Austen's best sympathies rest with the professional class — her own, that is. Although her most vivacious heroines (Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma) marry upwards into the landowning gentry, Catherine, Eliza, Fanny, and (probably) Emma Watson marry clergymen; clergymen, moreover, who are usually younger brothers. Austen represents the sterling virtues of the profession to which her father and two of her brothers belonged, although she doesn't dwell on their duties or their status within their profession, as Trollope was to do a generation later. In novels where the heroine marries into the gentry, however, Austen permits herself some satire of the ministry. Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton are parsons on their preferment, servile towards a 'patron', and eager to marry money. Even the highly principled Edmund Bertram, after he has 'been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income', submits to taking a second living, and so becomes a pluralist (MP 473).

A gentleman's son who must earn his living has still rather limited choices in Austen's world: the church, the army, the navy, the law, and medicine (and the last was still of dubious gentility). The army was a doubtful proposition as a living, since an officer's commission had to be purchased. Captain Tilney, an eldest son, can expect patronage, as he is following his father's profession. (General Tilney must have inherited his estate, as his army pay would not suffice to buy an abbey.) Colonel Brandon was originally a younger son, but inherits his estate on the early death of his elder brother. Wickham, a lieutenant in the militia, is chronically short of funds. Mr. Weston, as a Captain in the army, was considered beneath the gentry family of the Churchills; and before he can buy himself into Randalls and gentlemanhood he must make his money in trade (E 16). The army, that is, though it has prestige, is not a reliable source of income. But Emma, snob as she is, would probably not have taken so kindly to Mr. Weston as the husband of her friend if he had not once been 'Captain Weston'.

The navy, of course, is the profession Austen favours next after the clergy. In Persuasion she uses it as the model of a system of promotion by merit, to contrast with the old-world system of heredity that Sir Walter Elliot considers sacred. He objects to the navy 'as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of' (P 19). Sir Walter's disapproval signals Austen's approval. In her last novel she famously denounces the landed gentry and replaces them by the navy, substituting Admiral Croft for Sir Walter as the proprietor of Kellynch Hall, and allowing her heroine to reject William Elliot, heir to the estate, in favour of a relatively self-made man, the gallant Captain Wentworth. Wentworth, moreover, has made money by his profession. Since England was at war with France and its allies, and moreover dominant at sea, a Captain and his crew (whose shares of profits were minutely discriminated) could take 'prizes', capturing enemy ships at sea and realizing huge profits. 'Ah! those were pleasant days when I had the Laconia,' muses Captain Wentworth. 'How fast I made money in her' (69). The woman author's
sharp recognition of the economic motive for warfare is implicit in Admiral Croft’s bluff hopes for ‘the good luck to live to another war’ (70).

Austen shows herself quite knowledgeable not only about prizes and money-making in the navy, but about its internal hierarchy and systems of promotion. It was next to impossible to be genuinely ‘self-made’; in the absence of money, a man on his promotion would need ‘interest’, and/or luck. Wentworth’s first command, the Asp, is pronounced unfit for overseas service; but Admiral Croft insists, ‘Lucky fellow to get any thing so soon, with no more interest than his’ (65). We see some of this ‘interest’ at work when Henry Crawford procures William Price’s lieutenancy by using his influence with his uncle the Admiral (MP 398–9).

Austen’s preference for the navy over the army is signalled by the notice she takes of their uniforms. The susceptibility of young Kirby and Lydia Bennet to ‘the regimentals of an ensign’ marks them as ‘two of the silliest girls in the country’, in their father’s opinion; and their foolish mother’s wishful fondness for ‘a red coat’ puts her in the same company (PP 49). (There is often a sense of sexual threat attached to army characters, as to the seducers Wickham and Captain Tilney.) On the other hand, we are invited to participate in Fanny Price’s association of the naval profession with pride and virtue when she looks on her brother, ‘complete in his Lieutenant’s uniform, looking and moving all the taller, firmer, and more graceful for it, and with the happiest smile over his face’ (MP 384). At usual, however, Austen provides a qualification. Lest she be thought to generalize in her approval of the navy, she provides us with a negative example in Admiral Crawford, who has considerable power and wit, but who keeps a mistress. He is considered partly responsible for the vitiﬁed morality of his niece and nephew, Mary and Henry Crawford.

For representatives of the other professions we have to turn to relatively minor characters. The law is represented in Emma by Mr. Knightley’s younger brother, John Knightley, who is a respectable attorney in London. Country attorneys, such as Mr. Phillips in Pride and Prejudice, Robert Watson in The Watsons, or the Coxes, father and son, in Emma, are seen as verging on the vulgar. When Mary Crawford urges Edmund to ‘go into the law’, she probably hopes he would become a London barrister, the more distinguished branch of the legal profession, and one that was frequently a route to political ofﬁce. Austen’s sympathies are clearly with Edmund in his defence of his choice to be a clergyman as the more honorable calling (MP 93).

Physicians and surgeons, too, are relegated to the sidelines, although Austen notes their rising social status in making a memorable incident out of Mr. Perry’s changing decision about setting up a carriage in Emma. Like an expensive car today, carriages were status symbols. To maintain one’s own carriage and horses was a considerable expense, and the decision to do so must be taken with care. For this time Perry postpones the purchase; but we are given reason to believe that in due course he will indeed rise to the carriage-owning class (E 344–6). Perhaps in the heroine’s brother Sam, in The Watsons, ‘only a Surgeon, you know’ (MW 321), we would have had a sympathetic picture of a medical man; but in the fragment as we have it, he is in a fair way to being cut out in his courtesies of the heires by the ‘Military Men’ (348).

Austen locates few major characters in ‘trade’, and for many of her characters the word has a ring that seems to require apology. It is not surprising that the gentry and professional classes felt somewhat threatened by the large changes that were coming with the Industrial Revolution, and tended to close ranks against the newly powerful and the nouveaux riches. Trade represents new money, and money, like wine, isn’t considered quite respectable until it has aged a little. Austen is clearly fascinated by this process: though she doesn’t share the snobbish prejudice against trade, she pays close attention to the gradual assimilation of the trading classes into gentility. Emma Woodhouse again can represent the snobbish position, at least in her initial reaction, on the rise of the Cole family in Highbury. But it is important to notice that Emma’s attitude evolves and changes. The Coles, as Emma places them, are ‘of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel’ (E 207). However, they have prospered financially, and they have ‘added to their house, to their number of servants, to their expenses of every sort; and by this time were, in fortune and style of living, second only to the family at Highbury’ (207). (Mr. Knightley, strictly speaking, is from the nearby parish of Denwell.) Their place and their mobility in society are exactly rendered; Austen pays attention to the assault on gentility of the new mercantile middle class. Emma is stand-offish; she severely disapproves of Mr. Elton’s ‘propensity to dine with Mr. Cole’ (223), and she looks forward to refusing any invitation they may have the presumption to address to her. However, she must learn to swallow her pride. By the time she knows that all the people she likes best are to be assembled at the Coles’ dinner party, she is very glad to accept the invitation when it comes. But she is careful not to show any eagerness. ‘She owned that, considering every thing, she was not absolutely without inclination for the party’ (208): the sentence, with its careful qualiﬁcations and humorous double negative, signals the condescension of the grande dame of Highbury in thus conﬁrming her stamp of approval on the parvenus. Hereafter, apparently, the Coles, for all their tincture of ‘trade’, will be on visiting terms even with the most exclusive families of Highbury; and perhaps the young Coles of the
next generation may aspire to marry the Westons' daughter, or even the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Knightley of Donwell Abbey.

Much has to do with manners and tact. However reluctantly, Emma accepts the Coles into the genteel society of Highbury, because they 'expressed themselves so properly', they show 'real attention' (268). The new Mrs. Elton, however, is another matter. Before meeting her Emma has ascertained that she is 'the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol - merchant, of course, he must be called' (the dread word 'tradesman' may not be uttered) (283). But she conscientiously withholds judgment until she meets the bride in person. When she does appear, Mrs. Elton confirms Emma's worst prejudices: Emma can't stand her 'airs of prettiness' and 'underneath finery' (379). Moreover, not even the most readers. It is a difficult exercise in discrimination to pick apart social standing, manners, and morals. But Austen enables us to distinguish between Emma's unapproved social snobbery and her proper moral aversion to Mrs. Elton's loud-mouthed self-approval. For instance, like Miss Bingley Mrs. Elton regularly uses her newly acquired status to put down others.

A later stage of this assimilation of one class into another is seen in the Bingleys of Pride and Prejudice. Young Charles Bingley is a gentleman of leisure, and already associates with such a prestigious member of the country gentry as Darcy. But his is new money, 'acquired by trade' in the industrial north of England (PP 35). We see him in the process of buying his way into the gentry. His father 'had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it' (15). Bingley, then, in a leisurely manner, is shopping; by renting Netherfield manor, he is trying out country gentlemanship. Once he marries Jane, he does buy an estate near Derbyshire (385); so the next generation will be correspondingly a step upward in the social hierarchy. In Bingley we see the best of social mobility. He is good-humoured and charming, and he never stands on ceremony. Like Elizabeth when she moves into Pemberley, he will benefit his new social level by not trying to live up to it all the time. His sisters, however, show the aspect of social mobility that Austen distrusted. They are status-hungry, 'proud and conceited' (15), and Caroline Bingley is over-eager to ally herself and her brother with the prestige of the Darcy family. Conveniently forgetting that her own fortune was made in trade, she is spitefully scornful of Mr. Gardiner, the Bennet sisters' merchant uncle, 'who lives somewhere near Cheapside', she sneers. 'If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside', Bingley bursts out warmly, 'it would not make them a jot less agreeable' (36–7). Generously undiscriminating about shades of social distinction, he cares more about their manners, the amenable social conduct that makes them 'agreeable'. His is the approved attitude.

On this issue, however, Darcy realistically argues that the Bennet sisters' connection with trade 'must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world' (37). His qualification is presented as a point of fact, and he is not malicious, like Miss Bingley. But still, Darcy is to go through an evolution in his attitude, at last marrying, like Bingley, one of the Bennet girls, Cheapside uncle notwithstanding. Indeed, he comes to value the Gardiners, despite their connection with trade, more highly than his father-in-law the country gentleman. The quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and humane standards, Austen suggests, not by social status; but like her own temporary snobs, Darcy and Emma, she pays full attention to their social status first.

Since the union of the merchant's daughter with the earl's son depicted in Hogarth's 'Marriage à la Mode' (1745), England has been famous for its alliances between 'blood' and money, the bargain by which the aristocracy is enriched, and the merchant class can promote its grandchildren into rank and title. 'By this intermixture of the highest aristocracy with the more subaltern ranks of society', Bulwer explained, 'there are far finer and more numerous grades of dignity in this country than in any other' (Bulwer, England and the English 31). In exploring some of the finely nuanced distinctions that can arise from the subtle intermixture of birth and cash, he notes one marker of consequence that can easily be overlooked.

You see two gentlemen of the same birth, fortune, and estates — they are not of the same rank, — by no means — one looks down on the other as confessedly his inferior. Would you know why? His connections are much higher! (Bulwer, England and the English 31)

Austen is alert to this distinction as to others. Emma Woodhouse is indignant that the clergyman, Mr. Elton, should dare to propose marriage to her, or 'to suppose herself equal in connection or mind!' (E 136). ‘Connection’, like the ‘interest’ that Wentworth needs in order to get a good command in the navy, is a term fraught with significance. Bingley raises his status (though in his case it is unconsciously done) by being the friend of Darcy, as Harriet begins to be out of Robert Martin's reach when she becomes the friend of Miss Woodhouse.

If those involved in trade hover on the brink of gentility, there are many grades and degrees below them. Mrs. and Miss Bates in Emma are similarly poised, and a gulf of poverty yawns below them. They are of a class that was later to be called 'shabby-genteel', people who have come down in the world. Once prominent as the wife of the vicar, Mrs. Bates as a widow lives on slender means, in cramped quarters in an upstairs apartment, with only one servant, a maid-of-all-work. But though she and her daughter are short
of money and can’t entertain, they still have connections: they are on visiting terms with the best families of Highbury; and that’s more than can be said, as we have seen, for the Coles, with all their money and servants.

Another kind of amphibian, one who can move upwards or sink downwards in society, is the governess. Jane Fairfax, for instance, is well bred and well educated, beautiful and talented. But because her relatives cannot support her, she must earn her living at one of the only professions available to women, as a governess. The novels of Charlotte and Anne Brontë amply dramatize the painful position of well-educated girls from the impoverished upper classes who become virtually the servants of families often much less well bred than themselves. Jane Fairfax speaks in poignant terms of employment agencies for governesses: ‘offices for the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect’ (E 500). The alignment with the slave trade is explicit; there is a passing hint, too, of prostitution. Jane Fairfax, like Jane Eyre, is one of those governesses who survive by marrying into the gentry. But her escape from a life of drudgery, looking after Mrs. Smallridge’s three children for a pittance, is a narrow one.

The governess in the nineteenth-century novel becomes a culture heroine for the sad army of economically vulnerable single women, who had virtually no means of acquiring independence outside marriage, and little hope of independence within it either. ‘You know we must marry’, sighs Elizabeth Watson, one of four unmarried daughters of an impecunious clergymen. ‘...It is very bad to grow old & be poor & laughed at’ (MW 317). Charlotte Lucas chooses to marry the pompous and inept Mr. Collins, not for love, but because her only alternative is to live as a spinster on the charity of her obnoxious younger brother. Herself a single woman of small means, Austen can represent the bleak existence of such women, as well as the happier fate of the heroine who finds fulfillment in marriage to the right man.

Those who make big money in ‘trade’ are the merchants and wholesalers. But their great houses are dependent on the small tradesmen, the retailers, who distribute the goods. There is a large social difference between the two. In Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, a satirical panorama of the nineteenth-century class scene, the hero Dobbin is sneered at and called ‘Figs’ in school, because his father is a retail grocer, whereas the other boys are wholesalers’ sons. ‘My father’s a gentleman, and keeps his carriage’, boasts one young snob (chapter 3). The ladies and gentleman who are Austen’s major characters exist in a commodity culture that depends on the retail trade for its luxuries, its status symbols, often its very food and drink. Mrs. Allen in Northanger Abbey can think of nothing but her clothes; Robert Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility brings his whole personality to bear in the choice of a toothpick-case; Sir Walter Elliot praises the efficacy of Gowland’s lotion in removing freckles; such characters suggest an idle upper class obsessed with material luxuries, and ironically dependent on the very tradesmen they affect to despise. Austen sets some memorable scenes in shops: Harriet and Emma define themselves and their relationship in the matter of buying ribbons, feminine fripperies, in Ford’s of Highbury. Anne Elliot has a nervous reunion with Wentworth at Molland’s in Bath, where the crowds of the fashionable gather and assert their status: ‘altogether there was a delay, and a bustle, and a talking, which must make all the little crowd in the shop understand that Lady Dairymple was calling to convey Miss Elliot’ (P 176). Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park humorously notices the elaborate lines of communication in a country community: she gets word of the harp, on its way to the country from London, only when ‘it was seen by some farmer, and he told the miller, and the miller told the butcher, and the butcher’s son-in-law left word at the shop’ (MP 57–8). These retailers and small tradesmen do not figure prominently as characters, but their presence as part of the busy scene of life is carefully registered. There are many other relatively ‘low’ and minor characters who help to make society work smoothly in Austen’s novels. Mrs. Smith’s Nurse Rooke, in Persuasion, though not in genteel society, knows and transmits more of what goes on there than people who are.

Emma, which provides unobtrusive information on the whole community of Highbury, right down to the poor and the gypsy vagrants, has a number of minor characters who occupy places in the social hierarchy well beyond the gentry and professional classes where Austen’s major characters are situated. She writes no explicit analysis, but by passing details, she fills in the large social picture and provides indirect commentary. We hear of Wallis the baker, who bakes Mrs. Bates’ apples; of the village shop, Ford’s; of Mr. Knightley’s steward, William Larkins; his tenant farmer, Robert Martin, a sensitive young man who is bettering himself by reading; of Mrs. Goddard’s school, an unpretentious establishment ‘where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education’ (E 22). The leisureed and professional classes of Regency England were sustained by a great army of servants, an army which like the actual military had its own internal hierarchy and pecking order. Though Austen doesn’t usually give servants speaking parts, she recognizes the unobtrusive influence they have on the lives of their masters. It is a material convenience to Mr. Woodhouse of Haffield, for instance, that his coachman’s daughter is placed as housemaid at Randalls: James therefore never objects to harnessing the horses to the carriage, even though it is a very short drive (E 89). Such little negotiations between one social level and another are the stuff of life.