



Jane Austen: The French Connection

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MR. AUSTEN WAS ONCE ASKED by a neighbor, a man of many acres, whether Paris was in France or France was in Paris. I cannot help but feel that I have almost as little right as that shamefully clueless squire to be addressing the subject of Jane Austen and the French Connection.

Now, having delivered myself of that disclaimer, the first aspect of this subject that interests me, especially as I am deficient in that respect myself, is, how well did Jane Austen speak French? If she were here with us today, would she be quite at ease in Quebec City, choosing some gloves or purchasing a sponge cake?

First, it's time for a brief history lesson from your impartial, unprejudiced, and, until beginning to work on this paper, abysmally ignorant historian. I have now informed myself that sixteen years before Jane Austen was born, on September 13, 1759, Wolfe defeated Montcalm. The battle lasted one hour, and the history of Canada was forever changed.

It has been estimated that there were, then, approximately seventy thousand French settlers. Today, in a Canadian population of about twenty-nine million, more than four million speak French only.

Why do I tell you these things? Because the French, as a nation, have always been protective of their language and culture, and I have

to set the stage in order to place Jane in the *mis en scène*, though it is certainly not incumbent upon you to dedicate your full attention to what you may know already. When Jane was alive, France was a world power. In 1801, the first year for which statistics are available, France had a population of about twenty-five million, nearly three times that of England and Wales. In *A History of the French Language* Peter Rickard states that “at the time of the Revolution... French... had no serious rival... an international language.” It was the language of diplomacy and so remained until the twentieth century. It was spoken at the court of Frederick the Great in preference to German, and by aristocrats in St. Petersburg instead of Russian.

In other words, in spite of Mr. Austen’s neighbor, in Jane Austen’s lifetime most educated English people studied French as a matter of course. There are various references to this in her novels. Catherine Morland learned French from her mother. Maria and Julia Bertram “could not but hold [Fanny] cheap on finding... [she] had never learnt French.” Miss Bingley in her famous catalogue comprehending an accomplished woman cites her thorough knowledge of “the modern languages.” Lady Susan more realistically declares that to be “Mistress of French, Italian, German, Music... etc. will gain a Woman some applause, but will not add one Lover to her list.” When Sir Thomas appears in Fanny’s little attic to acquaint her with the particulars of Henry Crawford’s proposal, she fears “from the terror of former occasional visits... that he [was] going to examine her again in French and English.”

It seems Jane was accustomed to read French from a young age.

She was given *Fables Choisies* in December 1783, perhaps as an eighth birthday present. Gilson describes the volume as comprising “99 fables in French prose together with grammatical rules and vocabulary,” and refers to childish scribbblings and underlinings on its pages. Later, when she was twelve, she acquired *L’ami de l’adolescence*. In his *Memoir*, James Edward Austen-Leigh refers to “the considerable knowledge of French which the sisters possessed.”

Jane’s first instruction, like Catherine Morland’s, may have been from her mother. Mrs. Austen may have spoken excellent French. I have in my possession some volumes that belonged to her brother James Leigh Perrot, together with his crest and bookplate. *Les Oeuvres de Nicolas Boileau avec des Eclaircissements Historiques*, in three volumes

with footnotes on every page. Not exactly something one would pick up for light entertainment. If the brother was able to read such learned French, it's reasonable to assume his sister, Mrs. Austen, must have been equally fluent in the language.

In 1800 Jane writes that she has "just finished the first volume of *Les Veillées du Château*." Chapman thinks she read this in the original, for the translation is called *Tales of the Castle*. And in a letter to Martha, "you distress me cruelly by your request about Books; I cannot think of any to bring with me, nor have I any idea of our wanting them. I am reading Henry's History of England, which I will repeat to you in any manner you may prefer...with such provision on my part...you will do your's by repeating the French Grammar..."

In researching this paper, browsing about among the letters and novels, delving for French, I came across some interesting statistics. At least I found them so, and I can only hope that somebody will care for these minutiae.

In 161 letters, there are about twenty French words or phrases, which makes me wonder: how often do any of *us* use French in the course of our correspondence? I would hazard a guess, if we're not on E-mail, certainly not as often as Jane Austen.

Here, from her letters, is a sampling:

My mother made her *entrée* into the dressing-room through crowds of admiring spectators yesterday afternoon....John Bond *est à lui*....Our visit went off in a *come-cá* way... Mr. Dyson as usual looked wild, & Mrs. Dyson as usual looked big *et voila tout*....Discontented families & putrid fevers give the *coup de grace* to Green Park Buildings...What a *Çontretems!* in the language of France.... Yesterday passed quite *á la Godmersham*. Since breakfast I have had a *tete-a-tete* with Edward....A few of your inquiries, I think, are replied to *en avance*... Disastrous letters... Refusals everywhere—a Blank *partout*... I am sure of getting the intelligence I want from Henry, to whom I can apply at some convenient moment *sans peur et sans reproche*. George Hatton called yesterday, and I saw him... heard him talk, saw him bow, and was not in raptures... *eh! bien tout est dit*.

These French phrases seem to me spontaneous, as if it were

quite natural for Jane to express herself in this way, though it must be admitted that many are misspelled or lacking the proper accents. Possibly Jane did not study as assiduously as she should have done the French grammar she jokingly supposed Martha would read aloud to her. Too busy writing the *Juvenilia*, I shouldn't wonder.

Although Jane used French in her letters to Cassandra, she wisely refrained from doing so in her novels. A hundred and fifty years later H. G. Fowler was to state in his magisterial *Modern English Usage* that "display of superior knowledge is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth....To use French words that your reader or hearer does not know or does not fully understand...is inconsiderate and rude."

So although Jane writes to Cassandra of an acquaintance, "Poor Wretch, I am afraid she is *en Penitence*," in *Sanditon* the narrator merely remarks that "the young Lady at the other end of the Bench was doing Penance...."

A *coup de grâce* may have extinguished the Austens' hope of accommodation in Green Park Buildings, but no *coups* of any kind occur in the novels. Only two *entrées*: one when Emma watches "her own particular little friend" come into the Coles' drawing room, the other in *Northanger Abbey* when "our heroine" makes her *entrée* into life. *Tête-à-têtes* there are in abundance. Sixteen of them. But then, *tête-à-tête* you might say has been accepted altogether into the English language. James Morland paid his *devoirs* to Isabella Thorpe, but that word, too, is in the English dictionary.

The most unusual French word Jane employs is the "air of *empressement*" with which Captain Hunter approaches Miss Edwards, and the most striking when Mr. Knightley gives his opinion of Frank Churchill. "No, Emma, your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very "*amiable*," have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people; nothing really amiable about him."

In ferreting out this trivia, I discovered the surprising fact that in the novels the word *adieu* is used twenty-one times, but "goodbye" only twice. Can you guess who it is who says goodbye and holds out his hand? "She could not refuse to give him her's;—he pressed it with affection." It was Willoughby and Elinor. The other is in *The Watsons*

when little Charles Blake, “shook [Emma] by the hand & wished her ‘goodbye’ at least a dozen times.”

And what connection has this with French, you might ask? Merely that it serves as a contrast to the numerous *Adieus*.

Jane mentions France as a country only three times, all in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine, to Henry Tilney’s surprise, never looks at Beechen Cliff without being reminded of the south of France.

We know that Jane’s brother Edward was sent on the Grand Tour, and that James also went to France, and, later, Fanny and her brothers. But without question, the greatest French influence on Jane Austen was her exotic first cousin, Eliza Comtesse de Feuillide, whose miniature I am wearing as I write.

Eliza first burst upon the Steventon scene when Jane was only eleven, but she was, in the course of time, to become Jane’s most congenial and sympathetic sister-in-law.

To refresh memories: Eliza was born in India in 1761, the daughter of George Austen’s elder sister, Philadelphia Hancock, and her husband, Tysoe Saul Hancock, a surgeon who was also what we would now deem an entrepreneur—unfortunately, a rather unsuccessful one.

The Hancocks returned to England when Betsy, the name by which she was first known, was four. After three and a half years of living in relative style, they found themselves short of funds, so Mr. Hancock sailed back to India in the hope of making another fortune. Scholars now believe that Warren Hastings, governor general of India who was also Eliza’s godfather, was, in fact, her real father. Certainly he provided a trust fund of £5,000 for Eliza and her mother, which he later increased to £10,000. Mr. Austen was one of the trustees.

Whether Mr. Hancock was, or was not, her father, he was excessively concerned about the child’s upbringing. He wrote from India long letters of advice and instructions to his wife on the subject, making careful copies of what he wrote and numbering his letters. These are now in the British Museum.

As early as 1769, when Eliza was only eight, Hancock writes to his wife, “your sentiment’s of Betsy’s going to France are exactly the same with mine, and I most heartily wish that you may have received so much encouragement as to be now in France & situated to your mind. By [later] ships I shall write fully about the child’s education.”

This projected move to France did not take place until Eliza was fifteen. R. A. Austen-Leigh in the *Austen Papers* speculates that after her husband's death, "economy as well as inclination may have prompted Mrs. Hancock to fulfill her former wish, namely, to take her daughter abroad to complete her education." It sounds a reasonable premise. Claire Tomalin, however, supposes that it was Eliza's dubious social position that caused her mother to leave England when Eliza was of marriageable age.

Be that as it may, at twenty, Eliza became the bride of Jean Capot, Compte de Feuilleide, though his being a count is now also called into question. But on this occasion, I prefer not to demote him. When Eliza became pregnant, she wrote to her cousin Philadelphia Walter, "should a son be in store for M. de Feuilleide, he greatly wishes him to be a native of England....I own I have some repugnance to undertaking so long a journey in a situation so unfit for travelling...." Eliza was in an advanced state of pregnancy when she and her mother set forth for London from the south of France, arriving just in time for the birth of Hastings, Compte de Feuilleide in 1786. Her husband's affairs, I suspect in both meanings of the word, kept him in France.

Many letters exist from Eliza to her cousin Philadelphia, and it is through this source that we are acquainted with events at Steventon.

Eliza was twenty-six years old when she arrived at the parsonage for Christmas. Jane, as I have said, was eleven. Tall Henry was sixteen, and was eventually to become Eliza's second husband.

Meanwhile, this French countess, lively and vivacious, with her French maid and titled baby son, must have sailed into the sober family life at Steventon with as much *éclat* as the balloon in which M. de Blanchard had the previous year crossed the English channel.

We now come to the French Revolution.

Warren Roberts, in his book *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*, remarks, "It would be well to remember that in none of Austen's writings did she as much as mention the French Revolution....The only fact about the Revolution that one can glean from her letters is that she never discussed it."

Well, all I can say is, thank goodness she didn't. Do you think we would like her any the better if she were to have written a story along the lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*? And would we today enjoy

reading her letters more if they consisted of opinions on political affairs? One revolution is much like another, whether French, American, or Russian, but “People themselves alter so much there is something new to be observed in them forever.”

Nevertheless, the French revolution was for a time a threat to the stability of English society. There was even some sympathy for the revolutionaries before the excesses of the Terror turned compassion into horror and disgust. A curious relic of those eventful times survives, however, in Jane’s music books. She transcribed two songs about Marie Antoinette and the music of the *Marseillaise*, though she called it the “Marseilles March.”

“Captivity” is a song supposedly sung by Marie Antoinette after her husband, Louis XVI, had been guillotined. This occurred on January 21, 1793, but Marie Antoinette was kept on in the Conciergerie in solitary confinement for another nine months. What a frightful contrast to the luxuries of the court at Versailles. Her miserable and perilous situation must have struck at many hearts. One of them was Stephen Storace, an Italian composer living in England. He wrote “Captivity” while she was still alive.

Marie Antoinette may have been foolish, but still one shudders to think of her end, even as one does of the four young daughters of Tsar Nicholas.

You may be amused, however, in a ghoulish sort of way to hear a verse or two of “Captivity”—this contemporary song, which Jane, aged seventeen, copied out so carefully. To our modern ears the words sound ludicrously melodramatic. But then the situation was melodramatic.

See Austria’s daughter, Gallia’s Queen!
With haggard face and alter’d mien
A captive wretch, unknown, unseen,
Amid this sad captivity...
How dread the horrors of this place!
In ev’ry treach’rous guard, I trace
The dark design, the ruffian face,
Amid this sad captivity...
Then fancy paints my murder’d Lord
I see th’assassins blood-stain’d sword.
The headless trunk, the bosom gored,

Amid this sad captivity...
To thee, O King of Kings, I cry,
To thee I lift the streaming eye
And heave the penitential sigh
Amid this sad captivity.

It's interesting to speculate. Did the Austen family sit round the parlor and shiver at the heart-rending words? Eliza had returned to France when her son was about a year old, but then later came back to England again, leaving the Compté de Feuillide behind. Perhaps she and Jane sang "Captivity" together, little thinking that the same wretched fate would befall her own husband the following year.

What did Jane, herself, think of France, that traditional enemy of England ever since the twelfth century? As Maggie Lane has pointed out, with the exception of a brief peace in 1802, England was at war with France for almost the entire of Jane Austen's adult life.

Two of Jane's brothers, Francis and Charles, were officers in the navy engaging in battles, or rescue operations, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean to the West Indies.

Nelson instructed his midshipmen, "You must hate a Frenchman as you do the devil." And he further declared that his purpose was, "To serve my king and destroy the French...Down with the damned French villains! My blood boils at the name of a Frenchman."

A letter exists from Captain Francis Austen in command of the *Peterel* sloop. The action described took place in the Mediterranean off Cape Couronne. Napoleon was attempting to send supplies to his army left behind in Egypt.

Peterel at Sea, March 22, 1800

Sir: I have the honour to inform you that the vessels with which you saw me engaged yesterday afternoon... Were a ship, brig, and xebecque, belonging to the French Republic; two of which, the ship and xebecque, I drove on shore, and, after a running action of about one hour and a half... The third struck her colours. On taking possession, we found her to be *La Ligurienne*, French national brig... Commanded by François Auguste Pelabon, lieutenant de Vaisseau.

In 1796 Napoleon was considered a worse tyrant than Hitler in the Second World War. There was a real threat of invasion. The

entire coast of southern England was heavily fortified.

Fanny Knight, Jane's favorite niece, daughter of her rich brother Edward Knight, went in May 1806 to look at the defenses at Dover. Fanny, who was thirteen years old at the time, wrote to a friend:

From the top of the Castle we could just perceive the tower of Calais. But best of all were the subterranean works, I really never did see any thing half so curious. They really have such contrivances to keep old Boney out, that I think he might try to eternity & not get an inch farther! What with trapdoors, stifling boxes, battering rams & winding passages! We had an excellent guide and were amazingly entertained.

Some of Fanny's youngest brothers and sisters were still babies in the nursery. Here is a contemporary rhyme that gives the flavor of the period and that, perhaps, was sung to the children by the Knight's faithful nursemaid Sackree, who brought up Edward's eleven children.

Baby, baby, naughty baby,
Hush, you squalling thing, I say,
Peace this moment, peace or maybe
Bonaparte will pass this way.

Baby, baby, if he hears you,
As he gallops past the house,
Limb from limb at once he'll tear you,
Just as pussy tears a mouse.

And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you,
And he'll beat you all to pap
And he'll eat you, eat you, eat you,
Every morsel, snap, snap, snap.

All things considered, it is not really surprising that Jane was not a great fan of France.

When Napoleon was finally defeated at the battle of Waterloo, travel between the two countries could resume again, and several of Jane's relations and acquaintances seized the opportunity.

Jane writes to Cassandra, "We found Edward [Lefroy] very agreeable. He is come back from France, thinking of the French as one could wish, disappointed in everything."

And to Alethea Bigg: “I hope your letters from abroad are satisfactory. They would not be satisfactory to *me*, I confess, unless they breathed a strong spirit of regret for not being in England.”

Henry’s former French servants, Mrs. Perigord and her mother, Madame Bigeon, of whom Jane was fond, and who had nursed Eliza in her last illness, took the opportunity to visit their native country. “I have a letter from Mrs. Perigord, she & her Mother are in London again; she speaks of France as a scene of general Poverty & Misery,—no Money, no Trade—nothing to be got but by Innkeepers.”

Interestingly enough, it was to Madame Bigeon that Jane bequeathed a legacy of £50, the same sum that she left her brother Henry, all the rest of her modest estate going to Cassandra.

Through Henry and Eliza she met, or had the opportunity of meeting, French people. We are told that she declined an invitation to meet Madame de Stael. Wise Jane. What would she have had to say to this sophisticated woman, who had travelled and lived in many countries and taken many lovers? Madame de Stael read one of Jane’s novels; she found no interest in it and declared it “*vulgaire*.” But then, of the two authors, whose works are known today?

Jane also visited some people called D’Entraigue, who were later murdered by their Italian servant, quite as horrid an end as anything Mrs. Radcliffe could devise. Jane wrote: “Monsieur, the old Count, is a very fine looking man, with quiet manners, good enough for an Englishman. . . .”

We can see where Jane’s bias lies. If only our modest and self-effacing author could have known what was going on across the channel. Would she have felt differently? Would she have been gratified? Surely she ought to have been, because even if Jane did not love the French, it seems the French certainly loved Jane.

They were the first, David Gilson remarks, to pay her the compliment of translating her novels. Of course there were no copyright laws then. Extracts from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* appeared first in the Swiss periodical *Bibliothèque Britannique. Raison et Sensibilité* was published in Paris the year of Waterloo, and *Le Parc du Mansfield ou Les Trois Cousines* and *La Nouvelle Emma* in 1816. By 1824 all six major novels had been translated into French.

Only two small pieces of writing *about* Jane Austen herself composed in French during her lifetime survive. I have them in a little

book, hand-printed on nineteenth-century paper in a limited edition of one hundred copies and published in 1981 in Leiden, Holland. The title is *Les Mères peuvent le faire lire à leurs filles*.

Don't you think it is rather charming that in 1816, only a year after the battle of Waterloo, an *avertissement* should appear in France advocating that here—and written by an Englishwoman, too—is something mothers can read to their daughters?

The preface to *Raison et Sensibilité* strikes particular chords with those of us who have been considering *Northanger Abbey*.

Here, in part, is a very rough idea of the preface as translated by Isabelle de Montolieu:

The English romance of which I offer a translation to the French public is in a new genre, which seems to have succeeded in England to the one of horror. I find it much preferable. The English writers no longer take their readers into underground prisons in châteaux with double walls and they don't place brigands and assassins in the scene.

It is rather amusing to put these words into juxtaposition with Catherine's thoughts after she has met Henry on the stairs: "it was not in [Mrs. Radcliffe's] works perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for... Italy, Switzerland and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented."

The unsigned *avertissement* to *Emma* also comments on this new type of novel and new type of heroine, therefore translating the title as *La Nouvelle Emma*.

Frenchmen who have spent some time in England, will recognize in this book the customs, the habits and the manners of small towns.... Those on the contrary who have never left home, will learn without going away to understand their neighbours.... Having read *Emma* one believes that the author has traced portraits from life.

The author then describes Emma's situation as a wealthy, indulged young woman, and her attempts at matchmaking: "Happily for her, as well as for those for whom she was scheming, she did not succeed in making marriages or in preventing them, but ends up herself marrying a true gentleman."

Well, it's nice to know, isn't it, that this unknown Frenchman appreciated Mr. Knightley. He continues:

In England the title of gentleman is given to everyone as with us is that of monsieur. In the true meaning still today, a gentleman signifies an accomplished man, possessing besides beautiful manners, all the qualities of the spirit and of the heart. We could even assure ourselves that the title of gentleman is over and above that of lord.

The next piece I must give in the original French, because the punchline is in English:

...car c'est encore en Angleterre comme chez nous, où tous les nobles ne sont pas *gentlemen*; c'est ce que prouve le bon mot d'un satirique anglais. Apprenant qu'un lord avait été fait duc, il s'écria.

The king may make him a duke if he pleases, but I'll be damned if he can make a gentleman of him.

The author concludes by saying, and I translate: "Regarding the moral of *La Nouvelle Emma* one can say, as another author has said of his own book: *Les mères peuvent le faire lire à leurs filles.*"

In closing, I would like to repeat the words with which our dearest Jane concluded a letter to my great-grandfather, James Edward Austen,

Adieu, aimable.

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