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K E N   L U D W I G

*This is the text of a speech delivered on 19 October 2016 in Washington, D.C., to open the Annual Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America, which was celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of Emma, Austen's fifth novel.*

We are here on a very happy occasion, because what could be better than taking a few days out of our lives to honor an author who has given everyone at this convention so much joy.

I was at the Edinburgh Festival in August of this year, and one of the improvisational groups called themselves “Austentatious.” The performance began when a handsome young man in Regency attire came out onstage and explained to the audience that he was there to talk about Jane Austen, the author of six screenplays and the long, tedious novels they were based on.

A similar story involves a topic that we have all been thinking about lately, Jane Austen and Brexit. On 24 June 2016, the day after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, Alexandra Petri wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* saying, “Dang it, Britain, we thought you had things under control. . . . In the Jane Austen novel of international life, we were supposed to be

Marianne, the one with all the feelings. You were supposed to be Elinor, the sensible one.” Soon after, I heard a rerun on BBC Radio of *Desert Island Discs*, on which the new prime minister, Theresa May, was asked what single novel she wanted to take to an island as a castaway and she answered *Pride and Prejudice*. (She also said that her single luxury item would be a lifetime subscription to *Vogue*.)

I mention these stories to remind us of what a phenomenon Jane Austen has become. As demonstrated by the wonderful exhibition now at the Folger Shakespeare Library – *Will and Jane: Shakespeare, Austen, and the Cult of Celebrity*, curated by Janine Barchas and Kristina Straub – Jane Austen is currently going through a massive revival of interest equivalent to the Shakespeare revival of the late eighteenth century, which was fueled by David Garrick’s Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769.

Shakespeare became, in Garrick’s words, the Bard of our Idolatry. Later, George Bernard Shaw scorned this kind of adulation and called it “Bardolatry.” I wonder what the equivalent for Jane Austen would be? “Austeneration?” Are Austen’s novels “Janerific?”

Before leaving Shakespeare, I want to relate the most unusual Shakespeare sighting I’ve noticed in years. In connection with a new play I’m writing, I was watching the 1939 cowboy movie *Dodge City*, with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, and towards the beginning, Flynn hands the reins of his horse to a young boy in front of a saloon and says, “Wasn’t it Shakespeare who began by holding horses?” (And indeed, some scholars believe that Shakespeare began his working life in London as an hostler, holding horses for theater patrons.) Later in the film, Flynn’s sidekick “Tex” says to Flynn, “We fought the war together, built a railroad together; we ate, drank, slept, lived and died together,” echoing the words spoken by Celia to Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Who knew that gunslingers talked like that in the Old West?

Jane Austen was born in 1775, which is easy to remember because it was the year that the American Revolution started. Think three explosions: Lexington, Concord, and Jane Austen.

Her father was a clergyman in the village of Steventon, about sixty miles southwest of London. They lived a simple life in a small town but with a high level of sophistication. Her mother came from an intellectual family with close ties to Oxford, where

Austen's uncle had been the president of Trinity College. Austen had six brothers, two of whom became admirals. Another was a clergyman, and another was adopted into a very rich family. So Austen grew up as part of the gentry, not as part of the middle class like Charles Dickens and George Eliot.

Austen had one sister, her beloved Cassandra, to whom the bulk of her correspondence was written in later life. I'll never forget walking through the British Library several years ago and seeing such a letter for the first time. My heart stopped, and I staggered backwards, goggle-eyed like a character out of P. G. Wodehouse. I had read Jane Austen's correspondence all my life, but it had never occurred to me to ask if there were any manuscripts left. Indeed, I had assumed that there weren't. In fact, quite a number of Austen's letters and manuscripts survive, and most were written with the kind of perfection we associate with Mozart: with precision in both the handwriting and thinking.

That precision is a reminder that while Austen lived right up through the flowering of the Romantic movement – remember that Byron published two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, while Austen wrote *Emma* in 1815 – Austen always remained intellectually and artistically part of the eighteenth century. She loved the manners, the poise, the classicism and the wit of the early Regency era. One of her literary heroes was one of my own greatest heroes, Oliver Goldsmith, who exemplified the refinements of the eighteenth century. He not only wrote the best-selling novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* and a multivolume history of England – of which Austen wrote a parody while in her teens – he also wrote one of the best stage comedies of all time, *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Austen's biggest hero, of course, was Dr. Johnson, who towered over the intellectual life of the eighteenth century. It is not surprising, then, to learn that Boswell's remarkable *Life of Samuel Johnson* was published in 1791, when Austen was sixteen years old, just the right age for it to make an impact on her. What Johnson represented was an age that was social and practical, realistic and civilized, an age that valued "good sense" above all else; and these values describe precisely Austen's view of the world as reflected in her six great novels.

Tonight I want to discuss one aspect of those novels that is often

overlooked, and that is the literary sources of Austen's comedy. It will come as no surprise to anyone who has read any of the six novels that Austen is generally referred to as a comic novelist. By this, we mean that her novels end happily and contain none of the pity and terror we associate with the tragic form. But I believe we can also call Austen a comic novelist in a different, more profound sense.

Comedy, to paraphrase the critic Louis Kronenberger in his book *The Thread of Laughter* (1952), is not just a matter of happy endings. It is also a matter of creating a world in which happy endings are inevitable. Yes, Austen's novels contain sadness, irony, distress, and death – just think of Miss Bates and her mother. Yes, she creates a world where Emma *almost* ruins Harriet's happiness and *almost* loses the respect of Mr. Knightley and her community. But in the end, Emma can justifiably walk down the aisle in triumph on Mr. Knightley's arm, and Harriet can happily marry her true love, Mr. Martin, because in both cases, their happiness has been earned.

In other words, the novels are complex emotionally and dig down deeply into the human dilemma, but along the way they makes us laugh out loud at least three times per page. In my experience, this is something that only three or four other authors have done in the entire history of the English language. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* puts it this way: "I dearly love to laugh. . . . Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me . . . and I laugh at them whenever I can." As Lord David Cecil says in his invaluable book *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (1979), these words could well stand as Austen's motto.

Now let's turn to the novels themselves. Based on spending my life trying to write comedies for the stage, I've come to the conclusion that a comic play has four necessary ingredients: a good premise, a strong structure, wit, and resonance. We'll discuss each of these in turn, but first let's ask a more general question: Where did Austen learn to write with such comic confidence? Where did this kind of genius come from?

Every writer begins with imitation. As a novice, you start out and say: "I want to write something like *that*. Something like *Jane Eyre* or *Atonement* or *Right Ho, Jeeves*." Then you try it, and if you're any good, you end up creating your own style as a sort of

divine byproduct of your effort to emulate the writer you love. So the question arises, Who did Jane Austen try to emulate?

If she looked to the comic novels in the family library, she had very little to choose from. There was one comic masterpiece on the shelf, the first great comic novel written in English, *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding, published in 1749. Otherwise, what did she have to read? She had all those sentimental novels of her era, like Richardson's *Pamela*. She had the oddball meanderings of Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. She had the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett, like *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*. And she had the Gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and her ilk, things like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which Austen parodied in *Northanger Abbey*. But there was nothing in the history of the novel to prepare us, or to prepare Austen herself, for the likes of *Emma*, *Persuasion*, or *Pride and Prejudice*.

But – and here is the exciting part – there were quite a number of comic masterpieces that Austen did know all about, and those were the great comic stage plays of the prior two hundred years. Just think of the remarkable works that Austen had to look at: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Country Wife*, *The Way of the World*, *The Recruiting Officer*, *The Beaux' Stratagem*, *The Clandestine Marriage*, *The Relapse*, *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Wild Oats*. Here we see one comic masterpiece after another, plays that are witty, expertly plotted, with strong premises, that make us cry and think and laugh out loud.

Now for the kicker: We know for a fact that Jane Austen loved the theater and that she knew the dramatic repertoire of her time. We know from family letters that the Austens put on theatricals in both the barn and the drawing room at least twice a year when Austen was growing up, and that the plays they chose were virtually all comedies. In 1784, for example, the family put on Sheridan's *The Rivals*, certainly one of the greatest stage comedies ever written, full of just the kind of situations, spunk, heart, and romance that Austen ended up putting into her novels.

We also know, as described in *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, by Paula Byrne (2007), that Austen attended the theater frequently, in both Bath and London, where she often saw comedies and burlesques, including Garrick and Coleman's *The Clandestine Mar-*

riage, Molière's *Tartuffe* in a translation by Isaac Bickerstaffe, and even Edmund Kean playing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Most important, Austen knew her Shakespeare backwards and forwards. The evidence of this is scattered throughout her novels, and we needn't belabor it. The most famous reference, of course, comes in *Mansfield Park*, where Henry Crawford remarks: "Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman's constitution . . . one is intimate with him by instinct." To which Edmund Bertram responds: "His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody; they are in half the books we open. . . . We all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions."

Returning to the four characteristics of stage comedy that I mentioned earlier, let's look at each in turn.

The first element is a good comic premise. Imagine Jane Austen at the beginning of her career. She doesn't *have* a career. She's a twenty-year-old woman living in a small town looking at a blank piece of paper. She wants to be a novelist. Her pen is poised. Nothing is ordained. Nothing is written. The page is looking blanker by the second. What is she thinking?

"Hmm. I've read *Tom Jones*. Lots of adultery in that one. Not really my line. I've just reread *Twelfth Night*. Cross-dressing, twins, disguise, and a drunken uncle. Not yet. Maybe some day. Wait! Gothic novels. I like those. But they're so silly. They make me laugh more than they scare me. I don't want to *write* one. Hmm. That gives me an idea . . . What about a girl of seventeen who *loves* Gothic novels? She reads them constantly and adores their heroines, but what if this girl is nothing *like* a heroine, she's as ordinary as apple pie. And then some relatives take her on a holiday to Bath, which is known for being quite scandalous in character, and at the Pump Room she meets a handsome young man who takes an interest in her, and she starts fantasizing about his life and starts to believe that his father actually murdered his mother and that their lives are straight out of *The Castle of Otranto*. *Ha! Good story!*" And so she writes the first draft of *Northanger Abbey*, which turns out to be a boisterous success, in large part because of its clever and original comic premise.

Two books later: "Hmm. What about a couple of attractive twenty-somethings who are like oil and water. She's from humble

roots but is dazzlingly witty. He's handsome, distant, and very rich. They bicker and criticize each other until he saves her sister from a life of shame, which is when they admit that they're madly in love with each other. Good premise! I'll call it *Bias and Vanity*! No, not quite. What about *Pride and Prejudgment*? Almost. Wait for it . . . *Pride and Prejudice*!" And it's also the story of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which involves a cousin instead of a sister.

We could go through the other four novels, but the point is clear. Austen's novels have terrific storylines.

The second characteristic of comedy is a strong structure, but it is difficult to describe the architecture of a novel or play in the time allotted to us. In essence, a comic play is built like an arc, more specifically like the arc of a piano sonata: introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation, coda. That is the structure of *Twelfth Night*, and it is also the structure of its counterpart *Emma*.

Forgive me for returning to Shakespeare again, but it struck me for the first time while writing this speech that not only is *Much Ado About Nothing* the model for *Pride and Prejudice*, but also that, as I just mentioned, *Twelfth Night* is the forerunner of *Emma*. Think about the characters Emma and Olivia: They are both rich, beautiful heiresses. They both suffer losses. A variety of men pursue them. One is in a servile position (Mr. Elton in *Emma*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*). Another suitor comes from far away (Frank Churchill in *Emma*, Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*). And the heroine ends up with perhaps the most unexpected choice among the panoply of suitors. Like Shakespeare, Austen had an innate gift for literary structure, and all six of Austen's novels are architectural masterpieces. They are the Blenheim Palaces of literature.

Third, I mentioned wit as an ingredient of comedy, and here it is hard not to give examples. They're literally on every page. In *Emma*, in volume 1, chapter 8, Emma says: "Vanity working on a weak head produces every sort of mischief." Like Shakespeare, Austen loved to pepper her work with aphorisms.

In volume 1, chapter 13, Austen is talking about Isabella's visit to Hartfield and observes: "It was a delightful visit – perfect in being much too short." That one is reminiscent of an observation by Blaise Pascal which says (in paraphrase): "I would have written you a shorter letter if I had had the time." Both quips are funny, and they both get at something deeper underneath.

Later in chapter 13, Mr. Elton, the fawning clergyman, is referred to as “spruce, black and smiling.” If that’s not witty, I don’t know what is.

Also from *Emma* is this line from volume 3, chapter 18: “I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other.” It reminds me of my favorite Noël Coward quote (again paraphrased): “Things always work out well for me because I make bloody well sure they do.” What is notable about this particular remark is the way it represents the comic ideal, which is viewing life from an optimistic and deeply confident perspective. It says, in essence: “You can try to beat me down but it won’t work because I’m simply going to make sure that things turn out all right in the end.” Or as Austen puts it: “I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other.”

My last favorite bit of Austen wit is from the letters, where Austen writes, “Pictures of perfection, as you know, make me sick and wicked.” How could you not love someone who says that?

More important, what these witticisms show is Austen’s absolute confidence as a writer. There is nothing apologetic or tentative about Austen’s writing. You cannot be tentative and make bold statements like these. She writes as though she knows she’s a master, and it’s exhilarating.

We are now up to the fourth and final ingredient of a great comedy, resonance. What is it about Austen’s novels that gives them such depth and makes them last? What gives them layers so that we hear something new every time we read them? And what makes them so universal that they’re constantly being reinterpreted for each new age? I’m certain that there are many good answers to these questions, and for now I have three.

The first harkens back to one of my favorite definitions of art. Alfred North Whitehead, the mathematician and philosopher who wrote his famous *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell from 1910 to 1913, said that “art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern.”

For example: one brother has a reaction to the success of the other brother and he tries to take it out on him. That is a pattern that crops up again and again in literature. In *As You Like It*, Oliver picks a fight with Orlando because he’s jealous of him. In

*The Tempest*, the Duke of Milan deposes his brother Prospero and sets him adrift at sea because he wants his kingdom. And in *The School for Scandal*, Joseph Surface tries to make Charles Surface look disloyal to their rich uncle because he wants all the inheritance. So if we write a story where brotherly competition occurs, the reader thinks, “Aha. I’ve seen that pattern before and I feel a rush of pleasure in that recognition.”

In the comic world, these recurring patterns, or themes or tropes, are very specific. Some of them were invented as early as the third century B.C. by Plautus; others were invented by Shakespeare in the 1590s and early 1600s. There are about twelve or thirteen in all, and we should look at some of the most prominent.

Perhaps the most basic of all is where a parent tries to stand in the way of, or at least manipulate, the sexual urge of the younger generation. We see it around us in real life all the time. We also see it in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in *The Rivals*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. And we see it in virtually all of Jane Austen’s novels. Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*? Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*? Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*? All of these characters are trying to manipulate the love lives of their children.

Another comic trope is the escape from the city or court to the countryside, where the wisdom of nature transforms the traveler. Think of *As You Like It*. Think of *The Tempest*. Think of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. In Austen, the country life is always healing, and in *Emma* the outsiders are Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill.

Next, just as competing brothers are a trope, so are supporting and loving sisters. In *As You Like It* we have Celia and Rosalind (cousins in fact but sisterly in affection); and here is the passage where Celia defends Rosalind to the evil Duke, who has accused Rosalind of treason:

If she be a traitor,  
Why so am I: we still have slept together,  
Rose at an instant, learn’d, play’d, eat together;  
And wheresoe’er we went, like Juno’s swans,  
Still we went coupled and inseparable. [1.3.475–80]

Doesn’t that exactly describe Lizzy and Jane Bennet? Emma Woodhouse and Miss Taylor? Marianne and Elinor? And as we’ve seen, it also describes the way cowboys apparently felt about each other in Dodge City.

Another trope is the witty, sparring couple who are secretly in love with each other but spend most of their time arguing with each other. The original, of course, is *Much Ado About Nothing*, and we assume that Austen used this as the model for *Pride and Prejudice*. But isn't it also the basis of *Emma*? Aren't Emma and Mr. Knightley *always* arguing?

Other recurring tropes in comic literature include the servant – or unpleasant clergyman – who makes a pass at the heroine and gets rebuffed (see Malvolio and Mr. Elton); the braggart soldier who tries to impress the heroine but loses in the end (see Don Armado and Mr. Wickham); disguise; confusion; mistaken identity. All of these and about ten others are woven into the fabric of Western comedy, and Jane Austen knows them all and borrows from them all the time.

The second way that Austen achieves comic resonance relates to the stories themselves and the morals they tell. As we see time and again in her novels, Austen has deep moral values which she conveys not by preaching about them but through plot, character, and incident.

I recently read the new memoir entitled *Avid Reader* (2016) by the editor Robert Gottlieb, and at the end of the first chapter he says this: “[The] crucial literary experience of my pre-college years was my first reading of *Emma*, when I was sixteen. When Emma behaves so rudely to poor, harmless, talkative Miss Bates in the famous scene of the picnic on Box Hill, I was suffused with mortification: I had been forced to look at my own acts of carelessness and unkindness. Jane Austen had pinned me to the wall.” He continues: “It was the first time I really made the connection between what I was reading and my inner self. . . . It was in the novel, beginning with *Emma*, that I would discover some kind of moral compass.” How many of us in this room feel exactly the same way: that Jane Austen, along with a few other key authors, helped to form our moral values when we were just the right age for a little push?

We are now up to the third way that Austen achieves such resonance in her novels, and for me this has to do with both the quality of her writing and the style of her writing.

As for quality there can be no dispute. Perhaps more than any other writer in the English language, Austen is able to write with

such sensitive and minute accuracy that for a moment we gasp mentally in recognition of certain thoughts and emotions that up until now seemed hidden or unspoken. Let's examine one of my favorite passages from *Emma*, which appears at the beginning of volume 1, chapter 14, when everyone is arriving at the Westons' house for Christmas dinner. Emma is extremely happy because she loves the Westons, and especially Mrs. Weston, who was Emma's governess when she was still Miss Taylor. "There was not a creature in the world to whom [Emma] spoke with such unreserve, as to [Mrs. Weston]; not any one, to whom she related with such conviction . . . the little affairs, arrangements, perplexities, and pleasures of her father and herself"; "She could tell nothing of Hartfield, in which Mrs. Weston had not a lively concern; and half an hour's uninterrupted communication of all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends, was one of the first gratifications of each." Has any author in the English language ever written with more genius? I think not. Moreover, as a bonus, in this particular passage, Austen also describes the subject matter of all of her novels.

In a family letter Austen famously described her subject matter by saying "Two or three families in a country village is the very thing to work on." Elsewhere she describes her work as "that little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, in which I work with so fine a brush." And here, in the passage just quoted, she describes her life's work as "those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends." It is a remarkable and deeply accurate description of her life's work.

Now what about style? Since the early twentieth century Jane Austen's unique manner of composition has been described as "free indirect style." This is when the story is told in the third person, but then the narrator gets into a character's head and we begin to share that character's viewpoint to such an extent that we can judge his or her thoughts and prejudices as *they* view the outside world.

It sounds complicated, but it is actually fun to spot once you get the hang of it, so let's look at one remarkable example.

In volume 1, chapter 6, of *Emma*, Emma comes up with the idea of painting Harriet's portrait in order to get Mr. Elton more interested in Harriet. Then the narrator muses on Emma's artistic

abilities and goes right into Emma's mind as *she* thinks about her own lack of stick-to-it-iveness. "She had always wanted to do everything . . . and drew in almost every style; but steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command, and ought not to have failed of." The narrator isn't saying that Emma should have commanded that level of excellence, or that she ought not to have failed. It is *Emma herself* who is making this assessment, and she sounds pretty glum about it. To continue the passage: "She was not much deceived as to her own skill . . . but she was not unwilling to have others deceived, or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved." So while Emma feels bad that she isn't as accomplished as she would like to be, she's happy that other people think she's better than she is. For me this is genius on a par with Shakespeare.

There was an article in the *Guardian Review* on 5 December 2015 titled "How Jane Austen's *Emma* Changed the Face of Fiction," in which scholar John Mullan made the case that no novelist before Jane Austen could have written a novel like *Emma*. His view is that she invented a new, "revolutionary" style and that it deeply influenced Flaubert, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, as well as many of the serious novelists who came after. He says that "we both share Emma's judgments and watch her making them," and he believes that Austen was the "first novelist ever to manage this alchemy." He then says: "By the time that she began writing *Emma*, Austen was in new territory. She had been steeped in the fiction of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in her earliest work she wrote against the novels of sensibility and the gothic fiction that she knew so well. . . . But in the creative furore that saw her complete her last four novels in five years, she left the conventions of existing fiction behind."

Let me end with an observation. For anyone in the audience who is not already a Jane Austen fanatic, please become one as soon as possible. The way to do it is the same way that I recommend getting to know Shakespeare in my book *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, which is through memorization. There is simply no better way to understand an author than to memorize short passages of his or her writing. In this spirit, you should memorize short passages of Jane Austen's work, and if you do,

you will understand her genius more profoundly than you ever thought possible.

It is daunting, of course, to know where to begin, but here is a suggestion: start with the opening sentence of each novel. Each of them is uniquely beautiful, touching, and funny. “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.” This sentence is almost as wonderful as another Jane Austen opener, arguably the most famous sentence in the English language: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

In his book *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965), Northrop Frye, referring to Coleridge, wrote that “all literary critics are either *Iliad* critics or *Odyssey* critics. That is, interest in literature tends to center either in the area of tragedy, realism and irony, or in the area of comedy and romance.” For any of these critics, the rewards of Jane Austen are manifold. For *Odyssey* critics, with their special love for comedy and romance, her treasures are endless.