

# Hooray for Hypocrisy

Jane Austen's characters may have been repressed and sometimes snooty, but we are right to envy their decorum, consideration and restraint

BY EVAN THOMAS

**W**HAT EXPLAINS THE CURRENT FASCINATION WITH THE novels of Jane Austen? Her 19th-century dramas of British gentility offer no violence or explicit sex; the action is pretty much limited to raised eyebrows or the glimpse of a heaving breast. There is romance, to be sure, as well as cleverness and some nice scenery. Still, a deeper curiosity must have caused 3.7 million American households to tune in to the A&E/BBC six-hour television adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" last week, and many millions more to have flocked to screen versions of "Persuasion" and "Sense and Sensibility."

Maybe it is because we are drawn to a long-ago world in which people did not presume intimacy, a culture in which emotions were expressed with a degree of reticence, a society in which people—quaint phrase—minded their manners. A society, in short, quite unlike our own. Most people today are accustomed to a culture that is coarser, more flagrant, more intrusive, more rude—more in your face. Just a few minutes before the first episode of "Pride and Prejudice" came on the air, millions of TV viewers watched a couple of star players for the Dallas Cowboys ("America's Team") look right into the camera and utter the F word and S word to express their joy at having won the NFC championship. Locker-room talk has entered our living rooms, during what the networks call the "family viewing hour."

People have become accustomed to vulgarity, as well as other common indignities—their neighbors threatening to sue them, their colleagues incessantly whining, their former lovers spilling their secrets, and perfect strangers insulting them or, worse, confiding in them. Possibly, they are growing sick of it. The cult of Jane Austen, with its nostalgia for a more decorous and polite age, is one small sign. The flaps over porn on the Internet, the demand for a computer chip that can screen out sex and violence on TV, the competition among politicians to espouse "family values" are all evidence of discontent with our age of incivility. Phil Donahue, who started the confessional genre, called it quits last week, and some of his cruder heirs are losing rating points. True, there are still a lot more people who would rather watch Geraldo than read Gertrude Himmelfarb's recent book praising Victorian morality. But *something* is up.

Interestingly, the people who seem most desperate to create a new civil society are baby boomers, the generation that was largely responsible for wrecking the old one. In the '60s, "uptight" was about the worst thing they could say about you. But somehow letting it all hang out did not bring freedom, just child-support

payments, and the sexual revolution bequeathed us AIDS and date rape. Now former flower children are reading their children bedtime stories edited by conservative activist Bill Bennett, the one-time Reagan administration drug czar.

Though the baby boomers mostly got rid of manners as elitist and confining, we (I am 44) never got over our need for them. Most people have never lost the desire to maintain some small zone of privacy, to *not* share their feelings with people whom they neither trust nor love. People may scoff at the idea of being "respectable," but they do want to get respect.

Manners can, of course, be a thinly disguised tool to keep the lower orders in place. In England, modes of dress and speech long bespoke one's class. Jane Austen's England was stuffy and hierarchical; she used irony to poke fun at its snobbishness. In this country, plantation owners in the Old South had lovely manners, but they also had slaves.

**Often slobs:** Now we seek to show respect for every culture. Political correctness does not seem to have conferred dignity so much as an air of permanent grievance and a "got mine" sense of entitlement. Manners have been replaced by mau-mauing. By getting rid of manners we have not abolished class distinctions. The human impulse to sort and sift and feel superior is too strong, and it is hardly restricted to what used to be called the upper crust. Actually, members of the upper class were often slobs: they could afford to be indifferent to appearance. It was the middle class that self-consciously strove to demonstrate their status—to show that they were not working class. Look at old photos of a crowd at a ball game in the 1950s: the men are all wearing fedoras. Today, we have dress-down Friday, but the most casual among

us are competing to show they dress right out of Patagonia.

If anything, the country today has become more class bound, with the rise of the so-called overclass and a widening gap between rich and poor. The only difference is that one's class today is based on money and SAT scores, rather than birth and breeding. Arbitrary and unfair distinctions have been removed, but so, too, has a measure of grace and consideration.

Is there a way to have the manners celebrated by Jane Austen without the snobbery she satirized? The real lesson in Austen is not how to look but how to act—with deference and respect. It is no doubt unrealistic to think that people will have a true change of heart and become suddenly more self-restrained and considerate. But with a conscious effort, appearances can change. We may be selfish animals at heart, but we can at least pretend. A little hypocrisy is not always a bad thing. ■



**Before the Fall:** In the garden with Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet of 'Pride and Prejudice'