Education

In Jane Austen's day, there was no centrally-organized system of state-supported education. There were local charity or church-run day schools, but these were not attended by the children of the "genteel" social levels that Jane Austen writes about. And "Dame Schools", of the type satirized in Dicken's *Great Expectations*, were even less respectable (thus a character in one of Jane Austen's Juvenilia "knew nothing more at the age of 18 than what a twopenny Dame's School in the village could teach him").

Instead, "genteel" children might be educated at home by their parents, particularly when young (as the Morland children are in *Northanger Abbey*); or by live-in governesses (such as Miss Taylor in *Emma*) or tutors; or by going off to a private boarding school or to live with a tutor.

Since women did not usually have careers as such, and were not "citizens" in the sense of being directly involved in politics, there was little generally-perceived need for such higher education for them, and most writers on the subject of "female education" preferred that women receive a practical (and religious) training for their domestic role.

Accomplishments

For women of the "genteel" classes the goal of non-domestic education was thus often the acquisition of "accomplishments", such as the ability to draw, sing, play music, or speak modern (i.e. non-Classical) languages (generally French and Italian). Though it was not usually stated with such open cynicism, the purpose of such accomplishments was often only to attract a husband; so that these skills then tended to be neglected after marriage (Lady Middleton in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* "had celebrated her marriage by giving up music, although by her mother's account she had played extremely well, and by her own was very fond of it", while Mrs. Elton in *Emma* fears that her musical skills will deteriorate as have those of several married women she knows). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet displays her relatively detached attitude towards the more trivial aspects of this conventional game by adopting a somewhat careless attitude towards her "accomplishment" of playing the piano, and not practicing it diligently.

All this is not to say, by any means, that all women were ignorant; only that, since there was no *requirement* for academic education for women, and very little opportunity for women to use such knowledge (so that for women learning is only for "the improvement of her mind") -- therefore it depended very strongly on what kind of instruction each woman's parents offered her in childhood, and on the individual inclinations of the woman herself (as in the Bennet family) -- intelligent girls could even have an advantage over boys in being able to more or less choose their own studies, and in not being subject to the rather mixed blessings of a more uniform Classical curriculum.
Marriage and the Alternatives: The Status of Women

"Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony"
-- Jane Austen, letter of March 13, 1816

In Jane Austen's time, there was no real way for young women of the "genteel" classes to strike out on their own or be independent. Professions, the universities, politics, etc. were not open to women (thus Elizabeth's opinion "that though this great lady [Lady Catherine] was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish" is ironic, since of course no woman could be a justice of the peace or magistrate). Few occupations were open to them -- and those few that were (such as being a governess, i.e. a live-in teacher for the daughters or young children of a family) were not highly respected, and did not generally pay well or have very good working conditions.

Therefore most "genteel" women could not get money except by marrying for it or inheriting it (and since the eldest son generally inherits the bulk of an estate, as the "heir", a woman can only really be a "heiress" if she has no brothers). Only a rather small number of women were what could be called professionals, who though their own efforts earned an income sufficient to make themselves independent, or had a recognized career (Jane Austen herself was not really one of these few women professionals -- during the last six years of her life she earned an average of a little more than £100 a year by her novel-writing, but her family's expenses were four times this amount, and she did not meet with other authors or move in literary circles).