

THE USES AND ABUSES OF AUSTEN'S “ABSOLUTE HISTORICAL PICTURES”

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IN 1833, in response to the reissue of Austen's fictions in Richard Bentley's series *The Standard Novels*, the *Literary Gazette* recommended Austen's fictions to the “rising generation.” Noting that “one” particular “merit . . . of these delightful works is every hour increasing,” the *Gazette* continues somewhat ruefully that Austen's novels are fast “becoming absolute historical pictures.” Were it not for these works, in other words, younger readers “would have no idea of the animation of going down a country dance, or the delights of a tea-table.” The *Gazette's* view of history is both quaint and condescending. Implying that Austen's writings are a repository not just of information but of values that are fast diminishing, the *Gazette* projects a new readership, whose ignorance of ephemera bespeaks other deficiencies that reading Austen will not remedy so much as underscore. Reading Austen is not simply educative on this view; it is, in its new capacity as popular history, a steady reminder of how far the “rising generation” has already fallen. The *Gazette*, it turns out, was not very far off base in its assessment. In fact, it is characteristic of the popular pedagogy in which Austen's fictions were enlisted throughout much of the nineteenth century (and of her fictions' ability to enshrine an historical moment or heritage) that their most succinct manifestation may be found among a group of readers who, suffice it to say, are as removed from that historical world as one could possibly be. I'm referring, then, to “the Janeites” memorialized by Rudyard Kipling in his fictional vignette bearing that same title.¹

To those for whom the term “Janeite” is a shorthand for the amateur (and sometimes professional) enthusiast who knows Austen's novels (and their cinematic adaptations) seemingly by heart, not to mention the various sequels to works such as *Pride and Prejudice* that have been essayed over the years, the “Janeite” enthusiasm that Kipling explores may prove something of a puzzle. For unlike the members of the Jane Austen Society, who are nothing if not blessed with a fair measure of cultural capital, the visibly traumatized veterans of the World War I artillery unit, to whom the sobriquet was first applied, would seem to be the last readers—if indeed they are readers at all—in whom Austen might strike a responsive chord. This is most evident perhaps in the Janeites' mode of speaking, where cockneyisms and colloquialisms abound to a degree that is not only at odds with the otherwise normative discourse that we associate with Austen's writing, but at odds to a

degree that even characters such as Lucy Steele and Lydia Bennet look Austenian, as it were, by comparison.

The real problem with Kipling's Janeites, however, has little to do with the dramatic (and for Kipling's part often comical) slippage between their world, specifically the battlefield and its aftermath, and the insular, generally privileged, world of Austen's fictions, where catastrophe of the sort these men have witnessed is literally out of bounds. The problem rather involves what the Janeites have apparently derived from Austen's writings, which turns out to be nothing less—and nothing more—than the prerogative of judging and, more often than not, blaming others.

Although Kipling's veterans do not scruple in reiterating certain commonplaces regarding Austen, from the fact "Enery James" may be deemed the novelist's "lawful" son, to the sense, shared by no less a reader than Maria Edgeworth, that there is "nothin' to . . . nor in" Austen's novels (159), they also differ from many of Austen's own contemporaries (including Edgeworth) in extruding "meanin'" (159) from the novels as opposed to either pleasure or, as was frequently the case, appreciative surprise.² And the "meaning" they derive is almost always marked by a level of hostility for which the narratives have evidently been a goad. To the Janeites, then, Miss Bates is "just an old maid runnin' about like a hen with 'er 'ead cut off, an' her tongue loose at both ends," in the same way that General Tilney (mispronounced "Tilniz") is "a swine . . . and on the make" or that "they're all on the make, in a quiet way, in Jane" (159). This adversarial tendency is recapitulated in the Janeites' signature gesture in combat: the naming of their artillery pieces for certain of Austen's characters including Elizabeth Bennet ("Bloody Eliza"), Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Reverend Collins.

That Austen's writings are rife with judgment or even skepticism has long been a commonplace, from D. W. Harding's notion of the novels' "regulated hatred" to Marvin Mudrick's sense of the way irony in the novels remains a steady register of the author's disappointment.³ But what has been insufficiently appreciated is the degree to which such hatred, and the authority that subtends it, find issue in a developmental, or more precisely a pedagogical, trajectory to which not only Austen's heroines but also her readers in the nineteenth century—readers, it is worth emphasizing, who made Austen into the popular writer that she has remained ever since—were variously conscripted.

The first fully articulated claim for Austen's pedagogy is probably Bishop Richard Whatley's review of the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* some three years after their initial appearance.⁴ Although Whatley's judgments explicitly echo those of his predecessor in the *Quarterly Review*, Walter Scott, in heralding Austen's realism and what Scott termed the "narrative of all her novels" (64), Whatley also differs from Scott in explicitly lauding the novels' "moral lessons." Scott of course recognized the regulatory bent of Austen's writing, beginning with plot, where the heroine is typically "turned wise by precept, example, and experience" (64), and extending to the novels' probabilistic constitution, where "characters and incidents [are] introduced more immediately from the current of real life than was permitted by the formal rules of the novel" (59). But Scott also resembles Austen's other contemporaries in being primarily interested in the novels' striking fidelity to real life than with always marshaling that fidelity to some moral, or again disciplinary, purpose. Any argument for probability, which is another term for "things as they are," is far from neutral where politics or ideology are concerned. But even if we allow

that by "keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life," Austen, as Scott saw her, was simply urging readers to read about themselves rather than about characters whom they could only imagine emulating, it does not automatically follow that, by living within their means in the act of reading, Austen's readers were additionally bereft of any sense that they mattered as individuals. It is more that in producing "sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events" (63), Austen was able to reconcile her readers to the seemingly ordinary lives they lived simply by underscoring *their* inherent dynamism and interest. To the extent, in other words, that a reader can traverse the world of Austen's novels "without any chance of having his head turned," it is because such a "promenade" (68), as Scott conceives it, already presupposes that there is little that the hypothetical reader of Austen necessarily needs to feel good about herself and her milieu. If anything, Austen's reader is equivalent to *what* she reads and what she may read now with considerable interest.

It is this aspect of the ordinary, and the peculiar entitlements it presupposes, that seems to have troubled Whatley, forcing him to modify the claims of his predecessor and guide. Where for Scott the probabilistic dimension to Austen's writings is remarkable in being at once absorbing and true to life, it remains, as Whatley sees it, merely adjunct to the regulatory work of Austen's fiction and to modern fictions generally, which (as he approvingly notes) are finally providing the kind of "instruction" previously "available 'to the world in the shape of formal dissertations, or shorter and more desultory moral essays'" (92). Where Scott regards reality and Austen's reality as largely synonymous and indicative of a dynamism to quotidian life that fiction has only recently begun to appreciate, what Whatley calls the novels' "perfect appearance of reality" (96) is, as his terminology implies, a device or technique by which their "lessons" are more easily conveyed. "When the purpose," he writes, "of inculcating a religious principle is made too palpably prominent, many readers, if they do not throw aside the book with disgust, are apt to fortify themselves as they do to swallow a dose of medicine, endeavouring to *get it down* in large gulps, without tasting it more than is necessary" (95). This last, suffice it to say, is not the case in Austen, whose "lessons . . . though clearly and impressively conveyed are not offensively put forward, but spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story" (95). Still, in stressing both the didactic aspects of Austen's novels and their ability to naturalize, thereby masking, a largely educative function, Whatley also differs from Scott in implying that Austen's readership was, as *she* construed it, in need of moral instruction. Where Scott's Austen is largely on the reader's side, attending to and appreciating the particular milieu to which her audience already belongs, Whatley's Austen is addressing a differently conceived public that she is attracting in order to educate or correct.

From here, it would appear to be but a short leap from the purport of Austen's writings, as Whatley conceives it, to the audience that, as Kipling imagines it, has already derived palpable benefits from the writer over whom they enthuse. But there is also a problem with this transmission. Despite their unabashed enthusiasm, Kipling's Janeites appear to have derived little from Austen's novels beyond a generalized contempt—and I would further argue a self-legitimizing contempt—for Austen's less attractive characters. This points to one of the central ironies regarding Austen's popularity in the decades following her death. In contrast to the novelist's immediate contemporaries, the burgeoning readership that

Austen's works enjoyed during the Victorian period stands, as the *Literary Gazette* virtually prophesied, in nearly inverse proportion to what this same readership would seem to have gotten out of Austen's novels. The more widely Austen was read, that is, the less—or so it seems—was made of *what* was read. Earlier readers, as I have argued elsewhere, were frequently struck by the novels' lack of a moral purpose, which was (in their view) subordinated, along with plot, to the kind of liveliness of description that Scott makes a special point of emphasizing and praising.⁵ By contrast, later or Victorian readers tend to make the novels reducible to plot and to the ideology enforced by a narrative where virtue is rewarded, no matter how perfunctorily.

Thus *Mansfield Park*, which was unnoticed by reviewers at the time of its publication, and proved generally inscrutable to those contemporaries who were disposed to comment on it, turns out to be a representative text for Whatley, deflecting him from his nominal task, which was to review the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. Beginning by noting that "*Mansfield Park* contains some of Miss Austin's [sic] best moral lessons," Whatley proceeds to a description of the novel's pedagogy of which the following extracts are typical:

[Sir Thomas] is one of those men who always judge rightly, and act wisely, when a case is fairly put before them; but who are quite destitute of acuteness of discernment and adroitness of conduct. The Miss Bertrams, without any peculiarly bad natural disposition, and merely with that selfishness, self-importance, and want of moral training, which are the natural result of their education, are conducted, by a train of probable circumstances, to a catastrophe which involves their father in the deepest affliction. It is melancholy to reflect how many young ladies in the same sphere, with what is ordinarily called every advantage in point of education, are so precisely in the same situation, that if they avoid a similar fate, it must be rather from good luck than anything else. . . . [Fanny Price] presents a useful model to a good many modern females, whose apparent regard for religion in themselves and indifference about it in their partners for life, make one sometimes inclined to think that they hold the opposite extreme to the Turk's opinion, and believe men to have no souls. (99–100)

Whatley does go on to speak briefly of the two novels that it was his task to evaluate. But the point to stress about his review, apart from the fact that he joins subsequent readers in seeing *Mansfield Park* as being typical of Austen's writing generally, is that the education that Austen transmits in Whatley's analysis, turns out to be no education at all. Rather, the critique of education in *Mansfield Park* virtually presupposes that the reader has already been educated to different (and better) effect—so that like the novel's heroine, who has already learned all that she needs to learn⁶ (and whose signature action is simply to say "no" again and again), the reader can easily recognize what is obvious (and obviously wrong) in the world of the novel. Thus a work, and in Austen's case a body of writing, whose principal function is to give "instruction" previously available in forms that were strident and difficult to assimilate, performs its pedagogy not by merely sugarcoating it (as Whatley argues), but by also crediting the reader with a level of understanding that is largely unearned or earned only in contrast to certain characters to whom it is impossible *not* to condescend.

The very notion of Austen's writing as a pedagogical instrument is concerned less in the end with matters of instruction than with matters of legitimation in which the reader's education is presupposed simply as a condition of reading. This may appear to accord with Scott's view of Austen's readership as an already-privileged entity, whose everyday world bears testimony, in Austen's hands, to the range and reach of the lives of those reading her. But it is the case now that the reader of Austen, particularly as

Whatley imagines her, derives her status from what amounts in the end to an affiliation with the narrator, or with narrative authority, in which "instruction" is not only the presumptive means to such filiation, but an event or development that, in additionally transporting the reader to an increasingly lost or anterior world, is largely static and non-existent. The "successive generation of readers who," as Gary Kelly notes, "saw themselves in [Austen's] version of the novel as moral art" (19–20), did so, then, through a kind of fantasy or projective identification in which, by nearly-automatic concurrence with the narrator (or, in the case of *Mansfield Park*, the *narrative*), they were suddenly different and empowered thereby to pass judgment. The reasons for this shift in reading protocols, which Whatley's essay both outlines and anticipates, are undoubtedly manifold. But the key one, as the *Literary Gazette* plainly intuited, involves the sheer size and disposition of the "new linguistic community" that came to embrace Austen in the nineteenth century. The instability of this constituency, or what Nancy Armstrong in calling it a "middle-class aristocracy" suggests was its fundamental delegitimation (160), made the *ends* of education and historical knowledge, a more urgent teleology than the kind of development in which knowledge—beyond mere literacy—might conceivably play a role.

Such a trajectory, indeed a reverse trajectory, where moral judgment stands in place of any knowledge or understanding—or, as it turns out, legitimation—is put to comical, if exaggerated, effect in Kipling's vignette. But it is just as evident in the more measured and at times sophisticated assessments of Austen's writing in the half century preceding Kipling. One such example is the 1852 essay on Austen that inaugurated the *New Monthly Magazine's* series on female novelists. Although B. C. Southam dubs this "the first considerable 'middle-brow' piece on Jane Austen" (131) on the evidence of what appears to be its introductory bent, the essay's "middle-brow" aspects are equally germane in understanding the more informed judgments of literary professionals like George Henry Lewes and Thomas Macauley for whom Austen's characters are "similarly" real and thus actual people from whom lessons about the conduct of life can be derived. The fascination with Austenian verisimilitude is scarcely a Victorian invention. But where mid-century readers depart from their earlier counterparts, and even from a reader like Whatley who anticipates them, is in the tendency to transform a reality-effect, which Whatley saw largely as a rhetorical tool, into a real world shorn of all naturalizing props or techniques. When the *New Monthly* observes that the "figures and scenes pictured on Miss Austen's canvas" are "exquisitely real" so that what is "flat" and "insipid [in other hands]" is, "at her bidding, a sprightly, versatile, never-flagging chapter of realities" (134), and proceeds to assemble among its list of "lifelike" characters the figures in her novels who are often closest to caricature and most vulnerable to judgment, the "everyday" has moved from both Whatley's rhetorical apparatus and Scott's locus of appreciation to an aspect of the novels immaculately folded into an operation where regulation is no longer administered to the reader so much as *by the reader*. The normative operation of Austen's fictions that Whatley urged in emending Scott is by mid-century lodged entirely in a disposition to judgment, where, as Whatley's essay anticipates, character, especially blamable character, is sufficiently coextensive with the everyday that the novels' "perfect appearance of reality" is suddenly the means by which the reality of those under judgment, along with the judgments upon them in which readers are privileged to indulge, are reciprocally validated.

To be sure, the cautionary characters in Austen are invariably compared in these assessments with heroes and heroines who (like Fanny according to Whatley) are meant to serve as role models—so that the *New Monthly's* adduction of characters, ranging from General Tilney and Walter Elliot to Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine, is typically counterpointed by observations of Anne Elliot as “self-sacrificing and noble-hearted” or of Captain Wentworth as “intelligent, spirited, and generously high-minded” (138). But this does not diminish the fact that the authority of Austen’s fictions and the values they putatively uphold derive their sanction from a “reality”—the real people whom the reader can look down upon now in the act of blaming—which is rarely appealed to with the same urgency or enthusiasm with respect to characters who are merely praiseworthy.

Lewes, arguably the most erudite and prolific defender of Austen’s fiction at this time, and best known for having provoked Charlotte Brontë into her infamous critique of Austen as a writer lacking passion, sentiment and poetry, is also typical in his tendency both to locate and defend Austen’s “fidelity” (130) to real life in her “truthful representation of character” (153). Although such observations bear more than a trace of Scott’s way with Austen in appreciating the degree to which Austen’s characters are “at once life-like and interesting” so that the “good people” in her fictions “are . . . good, without being goody,” this sense of Austenian verisimilitude inevitably gives way to an appreciation of Austen’s “noodles” as so “accurately real” that “[t]hey become equal to actual experiences” (153).

To show this, Lewes summons the examples of Mrs. Elton in *Emma* and Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*: “We have so personal a dislike to Mrs. Elton and Mrs. Norris, that it would gratify our savage feeling to hear of some calamity befalling them” (153). Lewes is being hyperbolic, both in the fantasies he admits to harboring and in the reality-effect whose force has presumably provoked them. Nevertheless, the keyword in his assessment is not “character” or “truth” or “fidelity,” but “personal.” This is so because the extension of Austen’s fiction into actual experience is for Lewes, no less than for Kipling’s veterans, a seduction whose interpellative reach is keyed directly to the *status* conferred in the ability to judge and ultimately to hate. The pedagogical uses to which Austen’s fictions were put by readers such as Whatley were quickly assimilated to the uses that such education, or projective identification with the narrator, could be put in turn. These last conferred on the nineteenth-century, or again popular, reader of Austen a status that was not just unearned but, on the testimony of earlier readers such as Scott, largely misappropriated.

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NOTES

¹ References to Kipling’s “The Janeities” are to the text in *Debts and Credits* 147–176.

² For Edgeworth’s response to Austen, in this case *Emma*, see Butler, 445.

³ See Harding and Mudrick.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the nineteenth-century response to Austen are to the texts in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam.

⁵ “Austen’s Earliest Readers and the Rise of the Janeities,” in *Janeities: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*.

⁶ David Nokes observes this of Fanny in *Jane Austen: A Life* 413.

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