

Olivia Murphy, *Jane Austen the Reader: The Artist as Critic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 248. £50. ISBN 9781137292407.

Jane Austen the Reader is a valuable addition to what may be seen as the already well-mapped territory of Jane Austen's literary influences. Austen's personal views on the novel are sparse. Murphy contends that we can nonetheless recover Austen's critical opinions through her artistic practices. 'Austen belonged to a critical age and we underestimate the extent to which she engaged with her own contemporary culture when we fail to recognise the finely tuned critical perspective with which she read' (111-12). It is this critical quality of Austen's writing that this study sets out to demonstrate, anchoring her in the critical culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Murphy encourages us to see Austen's novels as displaying 'feminist critical practices' (92) and sheds new light on familiar scenes such as Elizabeth Bennet's reading of Mr Darcy's letter, Scott's 1816 *Edinburgh Review* of *Emma*, or Mrs Musgrove's 'fat sighings'. Her study complements Mary Waldron's *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* and Anthony Mandal's recent *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel*.

Murphy links Austen's 'critical reading' to her radical innovations of the novel. She shows that Austen conceived the novel as a porous, flexible form, capable of absorbing and in the process transforming other novels and other genres. Austen questioned and tested the possibilities and limitations of the novel throughout her career. Murphy is particularly successful where other Austen studies sometimes fail, in considering Austen's work as a coherent whole and in reconstructing the dialogue between the different phases of her writing career, revealing that Austen's earliest compositions share the same critical concerns as her later fiction. One of the strengths of Murphy's study is her analysis of Austen's juvenilia and their 'highly developed critical perspective on the novel' (9).

For Murphy, the genre of the novel in the period is inextricably linked to its reception, and Chapter 1 sets out to outline the critical culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Murphy argues for the importance of the reprinting of novels in the aftermath of the 1774 end of perpetual copyright and for the strong critical presence of women writers in the period. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 1810 50-volume edition of the *British Novelists* features prominently for its establishment of the genre and its showcasing of women writers. Murphy discusses Austen's own professional ambitions, recognising the 'culture of shared literary production, or at least appreciation, in the Austen family' (6) yet arguing for a strong-minded and self-assured young writer, evidenced by Austen's mock-self-aggrandising 'THE AUTHOR'.

Following on from this, Chapter 2 analyses the juvenilia and *Northanger Abbey* in conjunction, emphasising the point that Austen's works share the same critical engagement. Murphy shows that the concept of realism is central to these works; Austen constantly exposes the fictionality of the texts she engages with, an issue Murphy skilfully addresses throughout her study.

Chapter 3 then illustrates how *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* interrogate the conventions of the eighteenth-century novel through their radical treatment of women's sexuality, their disenchanted perspective on love (an argument that may ruffle Austen devotees who regard her as the romantic novelist par excellence), and their introduction of mixed characters. Austen's use of letters is also presented as a radical stylistic advance as fiction for the time dramatises the 'difficulties of reading' (69).

The discussion of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* (Chapters 4 and 6) reveals that Austen's mature fiction both critiqued the contemporary literary culture yet remained deeply engaged with eighteenth-century literature. She discusses Austen's 'system of covert quotations' (93) and offers a subtle reading of Austen's reworking of *Paradise Lost* in the

context of the Romantic era's reappraisal of Milton's work, which illustrates the novel's porousness and capaciousness.

Chapter 5 offers an elegant reading of *Emma* in conjunction with the 'Plan of a Novel', a collage of the different 'hints' from various dissatisfied first-readers, 'a spoof of contemporary taste' (123), in line with Austen's critique of the novel at the turn of the century. *Emma* participates in the shift in the criticism of the novel from moral to aesthetic questions.

Finally, Chapter 6 persuasively suggests we read *Persuasion* in the light of the juvenilia's 'Jack and Alice', continuing the analysis of the critical connections between the early and later work. By way of a conclusion Murphy provides an appendix on the fate of Jane Austen's personal book collection and the family's repositioning of the author's own published novels with works of 'unimpeachable orthodoxy' (182), which Murphy convincingly argues exemplifies the family's attempt to construct Austen as 'dear aunt Jane'.

Murphy's prose is lively, incisive, and stimulating. *Jane Austen the Reader* will be of interest not only to Austen scholars and enthusiasts but also to anyone interested in the history of the novel.

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