
THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

JANE AUSTEN

VOLUME 1

1811-1870

Edited by

B.C. SOUTHAM

ROUTLEDGE



**JANE AUSTEN: THE CRITICAL
HERITAGE VOLUME 1, 1811–1870**

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B.C.Southam

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JANE AUSTEN

VOLUME 1, 1811–1870

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London and New York

First Published in 1979
11 New Fetter
Lane London EC4P4EE
&
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 0-203-19671-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-19674-0 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-13456-0 (Print Edition)

General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side, we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in *The Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly-productive and lengthily-reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality.

For writers of the eighteenth century and earlier, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Messrs. Basil Blackwell Ltd. for permission to quote from *The Brontës: Lives and Correspondence* (1932) and the Clarendon Press, Oxford, for permission to re-print 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' from *Plan of a Novel* (1926), and to quote from the *Letters of Jane Austen* (1952), edited by R.W.Chapman.

I must acknowledge my considerable debt to the account of Jane Austen's early public by Professor C.B.Hogan, listed in the Bibliography, and to Mr. Darrell Mansell, Mr. Charles Murrah and Mr. Ioan Williams for their advice on my Introduction, and my thanks also go to Mr. Roger Morkam for his assistance in the preparation of the text.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The materials printed in this volume follow the original texts in all important respects. Lengthy extracts from the novels of Jane Austen have been omitted whenever they are quoted merely to illustrate the work in question. These omissions are clearly indicated in the text. Typographical errors in the originals have been silently corrected and the form of reference to titles has been regularized. But when Jane Austen's critics have referred to 'Miss Austin', this indicative spelling has been allowed to stand.

A late addition is item No. 45, an 1818 notice of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* .

Introduction

I

Anyone who turns to this volume for critical illumination is likely to be disappointed. In many respects the birth and growth of Jane Austen's critical reputation was a dull and long-drawn-out affair. The contemporary reviews are pedestrian and the later nineteenth-century criticism is unenlivened by disputes or by infectious enthusiasm. Nor are there those moments of insight which occur when one great mind is engaged by another—as when Johnson writes on Pope, Blake on Milton, or Coleridge on Shakespeare. Jane Austen's novels have never commanded such a level of attention, such a degree of imaginative empathy. There are no masterpieces of criticism in this volume. That said, however, there are certain, limited claims to be made on behalf of the material collected here. The case of Jane Austen is more than that of a single author. Her novels revealed to the early nineteenth-century reading public that fiction was capable of unsuspected power, that it was to be taken seriously as a form of literature, and that criticism of the novel could itself be a serious intellectual activity. In this respect the documentation of Jane Austen's contemporary reputation is important to our understanding of the rise of the novel in critical esteem.

On the other hand, it is evident enough from this book that the quantity of material is small. Only twelve contemporary reviews and notices are known to us, and even down to 1870 the record is sparse: fewer than fifty articles mention Jane Austen at any length and of these only six take her as the principal subject. After 1870 the situation takes a sudden change. In the space of two years there was a greater quantity of periodical criticism than had appeared in the previous fifty. This change was effected by the first book on Jane Austen, the *Memoir* by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, published in 1870—the terminus date I have chosen for the documents in this volume.

But the 1870 terminus is not merely a matter of convenience, with regard to the quantity of material; it is also a significant date with regard to the quality and kind of attention that Jane Austen received from her Victorian critics and admirers. The *Memoir* draws an engaging portrait of 'dear Aunt Jane', the

authoress of charming love-stories spiced with humour. This picture fed a growing interest in the author's life and times and encouraged a cult of appreciation in which biographical details and literary commentary were easily and uncritically mingled. In 1870 there also appeared a totally different view, in an essay by the Shakespearian scholar Richard Simpson. Simpson's Jane Austen is a genius, in outlook essentially critical, limited in her scope, yet remarkable for the power of irony with which she searches the conduct and values of her society. Simpson's view had no antecedents and no immediate following. It awakened no response in Victorian thought and for many years this understanding of the novelist's controlling irony played no part in the discussion of her art.

Pre-1870, Jane Austen was never thought of as a popular novelist nor did she get much attention from the Victorian critics and literary historians. But this is not to say that she went unvalued. From the very beginning, the contemporary reviewers had welcomed the novels as something new, altogether better than the usual run of romantic fiction. During her lifetime Jane Austen knew that her works were fashionable. They enjoyed a reputation for their decorum, their realism and wit and they seem to have been widely read among the upper-middle classes, even in the court of the Prince Regent. And there was no lack of recognition from the few critics capable of grasping her achievement. Scott, in 1815, and Whately, in 1821, saw her as a distinctively 'modern' novelist, the representative of a new school of writing. In the 1840s Lewes and Macaulay hailed her a classic of our literature, to be named in the same breath as Shakespeare. Down to 1870, there is a continuing thread of praise, acknowledging a great writer.

Yet throughout this period Jane Austen remained a critic's novelist—highly spoken of and little read. Nineteenth-century taste was for a literature of scope and power, strongly-drawn and vigorous in the manner of Scott, the Brontës, Thackeray and Dickens, writers who seemed to engage much wider areas of society and deeper levels of human experience. Later in the century, George Eliot's name was also entered as a measure of comparison, as we see in Dallas's remarks on *Felix Holt* (No. 40). By these standards, Jane Austen appeared narrow and provincial, interesting enough as a period writer, a historian of manners, but limited in culture and intellect, unlearned and without a declared seriousness of aim. Beside the other Victorian novelists, the restraint and subtlety of Jane Austen's art were seen at a disadvantage. Her admirers protested, with the complaint that her achievement was not understood. They felt that their first job was to reach an uninformed public with news of a great writer unread.

Such a situation was unfavourable to critical progress. We might hope to find a growing body of criticism, learning from the past, stimulated by the new perspectives of Victorian fiction; what we find instead is a succession of enthusiastic introductory pieces, many of them superficial and derivative, often resting on points already well made by Scott and Whately. Even into the 1870s

many critics assume that their readers are in need of detailed plot resumés and character accounts, as if Jane Austen were unknown.

These are purely circumstantial explanations for the slow development and the paucity of the nineteenth-century criticism of Jane Austen. Beyond these arguable and perhaps speculative factors is the simple truth that while Jane Austen is easy to write about, to write about the novels with insight and originality demands critical powers of a high order. Virginia Woolf, admirably equipped for the task, confessed to finding her 'of all great writers...the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness', a problem that certainly defeated most nineteenth-century critics. The secret of Jane Austen's art lies in her treatment of materials intrinsically slight. While her critics might recognize this, they had no ready approach to the techniques of narrative and structure, and the mode of irony which the novels involve. So, although it may be disappointing, it is certainly no surprise to find that the body of early writing on Jane Austen is small; and however interesting historically, of only slight value to us as criticism. This is not, however, to dismiss the few exceptional pieces, those by Scott, Whately, Lewes, Mrs. Oliphant, Julia Kavanagh and Simpson. Their views have yet to be bettered or superseded.

II

The first group of documents in this volume includes all the known contemporary reviews and notices for the period 1812 to 1821, complete except for the sometimes lengthy quotations, which have been omitted. This formal criticism is supported by a selection of contemporary private comment, from letters, journals and memoirs, including the views of the stupid and the prejudiced alongside the perceptions of intelligent readers. Most of this fragmentary material is presented within the Introduction, while the more substantial quotations are placed in the body of the volume with the formal reviews and notices.

From the material published between 1821 and 1870 I have chosen the most important critical pieces, together with a selection of articles and notices that characterize the variety of nineteenth-century attitudes towards Jane Austen. As with the contemporary material, the formal published criticism is supported by a small amount of private comment, much of it fragmentary, yet including some important items, notably the extreme 'Romantic' case against Jane Austen, declared so vehemently in the letters of Charlotte Brontë.

THE PUBLICATION OF THE NOVELS

Our understanding of Jane Austen's reception is gained partly through contemporary comments and reviews and partly through the historical and bibliographical details of the novels' publication. It is helpful, too, to recall a few details of Jane Austen's writing career: that when *Sense and Sensibility* was

published in 1811, Jane Austen had been writing for about twenty-five years, since the age of eleven, and that before reaching the general public she had enjoyed an immediate audience in her family circle and friends, some of whom were themselves writers in a small way and provided an unusually literate audience, responsive to her satire on gothic and sentimental fiction. The three early novels were begun—*Sense and Sensibility* in 1795, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1796 and *Northanger Abbey* in 1798—at a time when these literary fashions were at their height.

The first step towards publication was taken in November 1797 when her father wrote to the publisher Cadell, offering an early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, but without reply. In 1803, ‘Susan’, an early version of *Northanger Abbey*, was actually sold to Crosby (for £10) and advertised for publication. But the book never appeared, perhaps because Crosby felt that a skit on gothic fiction might spoil this still profitable market.

Sense and Sensibility was published by Thomas Egerton in November 1811. Egerton was not confident of the book’s commercial success, so it was produced at the author’s expense. The edition, estimated at about 1,000 copies, was sold out by July 1813, and a second edition was ready in November. In view of this minor success, Egerton bought *Pride and Prejudice* outright for £110, publishing it in January 1813 in an edition of about 1,500 copies. This was sold out by July, a second edition appeared in November, and a third in 1817. *Mansfield Park* was published in May 1814 in an edition of about 1,500 copies. But Egerton must have been doubtful of its popularity, for it came out on the same terms as *Sense and Sensibility*, at the author’s expense. In the event, *Mansfield Park* sold out in only six months. Yet Egerton seems to have hesitated over a second edition, which Jane Austen was hoping to arrange in November. He probably shared her private opinion, that ‘People are more ready to borrow and praise, than to buy’¹ (as she wrote on the morning of 30 November, before seeing Egerton with her brother Henry to settle the matter). Eventually, she went to a more literary publisher, John Murray, whom she found ‘a rogue, but a civil one’.² He offered £450 for the copyrights of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and her newly-completed *Emma*. But Henry pointed out that his sister had already made more than this out of the one edition of *Mansfield Park* and the even smaller first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*. Murray’s offer for the three novels together was refused, but Jane Austen allowed him to bring out the second edition of *Mansfield Park* in February 1816, and to publish *Emma* on ordinary royalty terms. *Emma* appeared in December 1815 in an edition of about 2,000 copies, 1,200 of which were sold within a year. The remaining novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published together by Murray as a four-volume set, in an edition of 2,500 copies, in December 1817 (with 1818 on the title-page) six months after their author’s death.

These facts and figures are instructive. Her publishers knew that Jane Austen was no best-seller like Scott, whose *Rob Roy* (1817), for example, sold 10,000 in a fortnight. But sales figures on their own are not a sure guide to the size of Jane

Austen's audience, for many of the copies went to the circulating libraries which supplied town and country subscribers. She was keenly interested in the reception of her books. The story of her writing career is that of an author determined to reach a larger audience than her own family and friends. She was prepared to spend years on the writing and revision of the early novels, and to pay for their publication. The two collections of 'Opinions' and remarks in her letters testify to her concern to record how the novels were received. But there is no evidence that she was directly influenced by her readers, either reviewers or friends. The only significant change to any of the published novels was made to the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, where a joke about 'a natural daughter', in [chapter 13](#), was cancelled, an omission made perhaps out of respect for public taste.

THE REVIEWERS

The patrons of the circulating libraries were mainly women with plenty of time for reading and a feminine taste for romantic fiction. This was the audience which publishers and hack writers had identified long ago, and for which they produced acres of romantic trash (Jane Austen's own word for it) and gothic thrillers, much of it written to a formula. The author of the notice of *Sense and Sensibility* in the *Critical Review* (No. 1) complained of this good-humouredly to his lady readers: the succession of novels with which he was faced

in substance, style, and size, so much alike, that after reading the first three pages, we may with very little difficulty not only know how they will end, but may give a shrewd guess of the various incidents which are to occur, the difficulties and dangers which must accrue, with all the vexations, awkward rencounters, &c. &c. which are so highly necessary to make up a fashionable novel.

In one way, then, this was a time unfavourable to writing which departed from the pattern of commercial success; thus Egerton's caution and the comparatively mild response of Jane Austen's readers, including the reviewers. No one expected to find literature in novels. On the other hand, for readers capable of discrimination, Jane Austen's novels were landmarks in the floods of rubbish. But among the reviewers Scott was alone in recognizing a great writer.

It would be unfair, however, not to concede that whatever their failings as critics, the reviewers were working under difficult conditions. For the most part, their job was merely to provide brief notices, extended with quotations, for the

¹ *Jane Austen's Letters* (1952) second edition, ed. R.W.Chapman, p. 419.

² *Letters*, p. 425.

benefit of women readers compiling their library lists and interested only in knowing whether they would like a book for its story, its characters and moral. In [chapter 5](#) of *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen jokingly complains about the state of reviewing. But reviewers really did write ‘in threadbare strains’; a work of fiction really could be dismissed in a phrase—‘it is only a novel!’ Almost these very words were used by a family friend, Mrs. Lefroy, who liked *Mansfield Park*, ‘but thought it a mere Novel’.¹

The answer to this was provided by Jane Austen herself. Her own writing was proof enough that the novel could be a distinct and respectable form of literature, and that it could satisfy the classical requirements of amusement and instruction. As Scott and Whately recognized, the novel, at least in the performance of Jane Austen, was to be taken seriously as a work of art, and their reviews were evidence that in turn criticism of the novel could itself be a serious intellectual activity.

III

Sense and Sensibility and *Pride and Prejudice*

At the time when *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were published fiction reviewing had no such dignity, and in the light of prevailing standards the two novels were remarkably well-received. The reviewers were in no doubt about the superiority of these works. Although their notices are extremely limited in scope they remark on points which any modern critic would want to make—the high comedy of the second chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, the liveliness of the characterization and the vigour of the writing in *Pride and Prejudice*, the unnatural abruptness of the change in Darcy, from indifference to ardour; and, on a more classical note, Jane Austen was commended for combining amusement and ethical teaching, a point stressed by both the reviewers of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Apart from a Mrs. Branstone, who thought both novels ‘downright nonsense’,¹ most individual readers enjoyed these works. At the end of November 1811, Lady Bessborough was recommending the newly-published *Sense and Sensibility* to a friend as ‘a clever novel. They were full of it at Althorp, and tho’ it ends stupidly I was much amus’d by it’.² Perhaps it was the marrying-off of Marianne and Colonel Brandon that Lady Bessborough objected to, an aspect of Jane Austen’s ironic scheme that may have puzzled other readers as well. The ‘cleverness’ of Jane Austen’s writing was noticed elsewhere. At a dinner party Sheridan remarked that *Pride and Prejudice* was ‘one of the cleverest things he ever read’ and advised his neighbour to buy this new novel

¹ See p. 51.

immediately.³ Jane Austen heard through her brother Henry that Warren Hastings admired the novel, particularly the character of Elizabeth Bennet, news which she found ‘particularly welcome’.⁴ It was ‘the fashionable novel’ of the time, according to Annabella Milbanke, the future Lady Byron, who was impressed by its ‘strength of character’.¹ At first she had supposed *Pride and Prejudice* to be the work of a sister of the prolific novelist Charlotte Smith, but writing to her mother in May 1813 she had second thoughts:

I have finished the novel called *Pride and Prejudice*, which I think a very superior work. It depends not on any of the common resources of novel writers, no drownings, no conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lap-dogs and parrots, nor chambermaids and milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. I really think it is the *most probable* I have ever read. It is not a crying book, but the interest is very strong, especially for Mr. Darcy. The characters which are not amiable are diverting, and all of them are consistently supported. I wish much to know who is the author or *ess* as I am told.²

This is the response of an intelligent reader who understands Jane Austen’s achievement in writing a love-story in which the reader’s sympathies are deeply involved (the meaning here of the word ‘interest’) without the melodrama and sentiment commonly found in romantic fiction. In 1815, William Gifford, the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, remarked in a similar way upon the novel’s probability; he was reporting on it for John Murray, the publisher, to whom Jane Austen had just offered *Emma*:

I have for the first time looked into ‘P and P’; and it is really a very pretty thing. No dark passages; no secret chambers; no wind-howlings in long galleries; no drops of blood upon a rusty dagger—things that should now be left to ladies’ maids and sentimental washerwomen.³

He was relieved to read a story mercifully free from the lumber of gothic fiction. A second reading, in September 1815, only confirmed his opinion: ‘I have read “P & P” *again* —’tis very good’.⁴

Other experienced readers who thought well of *Pride and Prejudice* included Jane Austen’s fellow-writer Miss Mitford, who read the book in the autumn of

¹ See pp. 49–50.

² Letter, 25 November 1811, *Lord Granville Leveson Gower, Private Correspondence* (1916), ed. Castalia Granville, ii, 418.

³ From an unpublished manuscript in the British Museum, quoted in *Jane Austen: A Critical Bibliography* (1955), R.W.Chapman, p. 20.

⁴ Letter, 15 September 1813, to Cassandra Austen, *Letters*, p. 324; and see p. 320.

1814 and found it ‘extremely good’,⁵ and Henry Crabb Robinson, that tireless diarist and literary correspondent. Although he was keeping his enormous journals and reminiscences throughout the entire period of Jane Austen’s writing career, thenovels are not mentioned until as late as 1819. In January of that year, *Pride and Prejudice* kept him up until two in the morning for two nights running. He was particularly impressed by the characterization and ‘the perfectly colloquial style of the dialogue’ (No. 15a). A few days later he recommended the novel for ‘the perfect truth of the painting’ (No. 15b).

The novels continued to be praised throughout the nineteenth century for the accuracy and truth of their picture of life. Yet these very qualities could also be viewed with a critical eye. For some readers, Jane Austen’s realism was earth-bound, vulgar and uninspiring, as we see in a letter from Lady Darcy, written in May 1813:

‘P & P’ I do not very much like. Want of interest is the fault I can least excuse in works of mere amusement, and however natural the picture of vulgar minds and manners is there given, it is unrelieved by the agreeable contrast of more dignified and refined characters occasionally captivating attention. Some power of new character is, however, ably displayed, and Mr. Bennett’s indifference is in truth not exaggeration.¹

Lady Darcy’s basic complaint is that the novel lacks ‘interest’. This word had taken a rather specialized meaning from its use in sentimental literature, where ‘interest’ invariably meant romantic interest. The force of this meaning to the early nineteenth-century reader comes across clearly in Egerton’s advertisement for *Sense and Sensibility*, styling it simply enough an ‘INTERESTING NOVEL’.² The word’s finer shades of meaning are seen in Lady Darcy’s comments. The convention of love in sentimental fiction required aristocratic connections for at least one, if not both of the lovers, and this social elevation was to be matched with the peculiar moral elevation of romantic attachment. By this code, love was always love-at-first-sight, springing from the immediacy of ‘first impressions’. The consecration of that love was marriage, but marriage far removed from such mundane considerations as solvency or home-hunting or in-laws or compatibility. Whatever hazards might afflict the lovers, their love itself was an unassailed ideal.

¹ Letter, early 1813, *Life and Letters of Anne Isabella, Lady Noel Byron* (1929), ed. E.C. Mayne, p. 55.

² Letter, 1 May 1813, to her mother, *Lord Byron’s Wife* (1962), Malcolm Elwin, p. 159.

³ Letter, September (?) 1815, *A Publisher and his Friends* (1891), ed. Samuel Smiles, i, 282.

⁴ Letter, 29 September 1815, i, 282.

⁵ Letter, 31 October 1814, *Life of Mary Russell Mitford* (1870), ed. A.G.L’Estrange, i, 293.

It is easy enough to understand why Lady Darcy found *Pride and Prejudice* so indigestible. The ungentlemanly and unladylike manners of the Bennet family were not the stuff for fiction; nor should young ladies be so very calculating and thoughtful about their partners and their loved ones; nor should marriage be drawn as a social institution, so deeply involved in ordinary life, so open to petty family quarrels and untragic issues.

These points are worth making at some length. Lady Darcy's reaction is not untypical. It expresses the concern of readers who wanted to preserve literature as a kind of higher, happier reality, and Jane Austen's novels were a particular threat to the greatly-prized unreality of romantic and sentimental fiction. While few readers could deny that they enjoyed reading the novels—for the vitality of the characters, the wit, the accuracy and realism of her picture of society—praise comes grudgingly, fenced round with qualifications: that her characters are socially and morally vulgar, that the novels are simply entertaining, that the 'instruction' (what we might term the adduceable 'moral' of the story) is not inspiring or elevating, that the commonplace is perfectly rendered but the commonplace is not what we look for in literature. These notions of decorum persisted throughout the nineteenth century, and created a particular unease in the reader, the sense on one hand that he was undoubtedly enjoying Jane Austen, but equally a sense that he must temper his admiration, recalling that novels so very worldly and realistic could never be great art.

The next few pages give plentiful evidence of this lurking ambivalence of response. Towards *Pride and Prejudice* it is shown in a letter from Miss Mitford to Sir William Elford, written in December 1814 (No.6). She calls for an improved Jane Austen, a writer with 'more taste', more respect for 'the graceful', a writer, one would say, improved quite out of her truthfulness about the people and society around her. Together with her spoken wish to read an idealizing Jane Austen is Miss Mitford's unspoken wish to have her less of a satirist, less of a critic. This, too, is a reaction shared by other contemporary readers.

Mansfield Park

Rather curiously, *Mansfield Park* went unreviewed. The *British Critic* and the *Critical Review* had noticed the two earlier novels, and they might well have been expected to mention the third. But perhaps the editors were doubtful of the novel's appeal. The love and marriage interest was strong in the previous books, and both open on a note of high comedy; whereas what romantic interest there is in *Mansfield Park* is delayed by the Cinderella story of Fanny's early life, and

¹ Letter, 14 May 1813, to Sara Ponsonby, *The Hamwood Papers* (1930), ed. E.M.Bell, p. 351.

² *Star*, 27 November 1811.

there is little glamour to her eventual union with Edmund Bertram. The tone of the novel, too, is quite different from the sparkle and wit of *Pride and Prejudice*. On this score, then, it is easy to see why *Mansfield Park* passed unmentioned, a circumstance that Jane Austen probably noticed, just as she was quick to see that Scott also ignored *Mansfield Park* in his review of *Emma* (No. 8), a glaring omission, since he did refer there to the two other novels.

By way of recompense, we are fortunate to have the collection of comments gathered together and transcribed by Jane Austen herself under the title 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' (No. 5a). These thirty-eight comments, some only a few words, some a paragraph long, were compiled by Jane Austen from her own correspondence, from hearsay and from remarks passed on to her by members of the family. The manuscript is undated, but external evidence shows that the opinions are those of the novel's first readers in 1814 and 1815. Little allowance need be made for family partiality. The Austens were known for their candour as well as for family pride. What is particularly striking about these comments is their testimony to the readers' involvement in the drama of character and action: their sharp division, for example, on questions of innocence and guilt; whether or not Henry Crawford's elopement with Mrs. Rushworth is 'natural'. Other repeated comments touch on the success of the Portsmouth scenes; the character of the heroine; comparisons, favourable and unfavourable with *Pride and Prejudice*; and the evident moral tendency of the book.

Jane Austen sent a copy of *Mansfield Park* to Maria Edgeworth (the only contemporary novelist that she seems to have admired, apart from Scott). Unfortunately, no reply survives, although we know that Maria Edgeworth found it 'like real life and very interesting'¹ and that her family was 'much entertained'² by the book in December 1814. Three months earlier another reader had compared the two authors:

Have you read *Mansfield Park*? ...I am a great admirer of the two other works by the same author. She has not so much fine humour as your friend Miss Edgeworth, but she is more skilful in contriving a story, she has a great deal more feeling, and she never plagues you with any chemistry, mechanics, or political economy, which are all excellent things in their way, but vile, cold-hearted trash in a novel, and, I piously hope, all of old Edgeworth's putting in.³

¹ *The Great Maria* (1959), E.I.Jones, p. 124.

² Letter, 26 December 1814, to Miss Ruxton, *Memoir of Maria Edgeworth* (1867), F.A. Edgeworth, i, 310.

³ Letter, 11 August 1814, Earl of Dudley to Helen D'Arcy Stewart, *Letters to Ivy* (1905), ed. S.H.Romilly, p. 250.

The comparison reflects favourably on the integrity of Jane Austen's fiction. It was a familiar trick for novelists to give their stories an added weight or the appearance of authority by inserting chunks of information or propaganda of one kind or another. Jokingly, Jane Austen had suggested to her sister Cassandra that she might do something of this kind in *Pride and Prejudice*, to stretch it out 'here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story'.¹

Two other comments on *Mansfield Park* share the note of qualified admiration that we met in Miss Mitford on *Pride and Prejudice*. First, a remark of Lady Frampton writing to her daughter in June 1814: 'As I cautioned you against Madame d'Arblay's novel [*The Wanderer*, 1814], now I recommend you *Mansfield Park* if you meet with it. It is not much of a novel, more a history of a family party in the country, very natural, and characters well drawn.'² Possibly Lady Frampton wanted a story which was less tame, less static, more in line with the melodrama and often exotic voyaging of romantic novels. Another correspondent, a Miss Anne Romilly, writing to Maria Edgeworth in November 1814, matches Lady Frampton in discounting *Mansfield Park* as a work of literature:

Have you read *Mansfield Park*? It has been pretty generally admired here, and I think all novels must be that are true to life which this is, with a good strong vein of principle running thro' the whole. It has not however that elevation of virtue, something beyond nature, that gives the greatest charm to a novel, but still it is real natural everyday life, and will amuse an idle hour very well in spite of its faults.³

'Its faults' are the respects in which *Mansfield Park* fails to touch some higher, ideal reality; while the realism with which it treats everyday life recommends it only as amusement for 'an idle hour'; a critical principle that neatly disposes of Jane Austen as a social satirist.

Emma

Superficially, *Emma* is very different from *Mansfield Park*. High-spirited, full of comic intrigue and misunderstanding, and with a match-making story from start to finish, it was a novel to attract attention, as *Mansfield Park* was not. The publisher John Murray was warm in its praise, and William Gifford, to whom he sent the manuscript for report, answered that he had 'nothing but good to say. I

¹ Letter, 4 February 1813, *Letters*, pp. 299–300.

² Letter, 15 June 1814, to Mrs. Frampton, *Journal of Mary Frampton* (1885), ed. H.G.Mundy, p. 226.

³ Letter, 7 November 1814, *Romilly-Edgeworth Letters* (1936), ed. S.H.Romilly, p. 92.

was sure of the writer before you mentioned her'.¹ That was in September 1815. Three months later, Murray wrote to Scott, inviting him to review *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review*, of which he was the founder-proprietor: 'Have you any fancy to dash off an article on *Emma*? It wants incident and romance, does it not? None of the author's other novels have been noticed, and surely *Pride and Prejudice* merits high commendation.'² Scott accepted the invitation and produced the first major account of Jane Austen as a novelist (No. 8). Murray blandly assumed Scott's agreement that *Emma* 'wants incident and romance'; nothing could be further from the truth. Scott pointed out that the story has 'cross purposes enough (were the novel of a more romantic cast) for cutting half the men's throats and breaking all the women's hearts'. It is not, as Murray would have it, an *un* romantic novel, but as Scott perceives, an *anti* -romantic novel, in which Jane Austen is playing upon the devices and situations of romantic fiction, adjusting them to a story whose drama and distresses are personal and domestic.

The significance of this review, in the history of criticism as well as in Jane Austen studies, is the breadth of its perspective. Scott draws attention to detail—to the neatness and point of the prose style, to the precision and finish of the character-drawing. He sees the relationship between these aspects of technique and the creation of a fictional world which remains faithful to the events and situations in 'the current of ordinary life'. As a writer himself, he understands what a feat is involved in the imitation of ordinary verifiable reality. And he is able to place this achievement historically, as a turning-point in the progress of fiction. In Jane Austen, he declares, we have 'the modern novel', the antithesis of the sentimental romance in which the nature imitated is *la belle nature*, where the action and characters obey laws remote from the necessities of human existence as we commonly experience it.

What Scott has to say about Jane Austen is stated with confidence and authority. His account wins our consent for its persuasive flair and common sense. It would be perfectly reasonable to assume that Scott's contemporary readers were equally won over, that *la belle nature* had now been shown up once and for all, and that Jane Austen's novels would thereafter be accepted as setting a standard of artistic truth and reality.

But this would be to underestimate the tenacity with which Scott's readers clung to the 'inspirational' view of literature: that novels, like poetry, should elevate mankind by their depiction of ideal persons, even in defiance of the known realities of ordinary life. This issue is brought out with almost startling clarity in a letter to Scott from Lady Frances Shelley, written in August 1819. Lady Shelley objected to the way in which Diana Vernon ('a common sort of married body' as Scott describes her) was presented in *Rob Roy* (1817), and the force of her criticism seems to attach equally to his review of *Emma* :

¹ Letter, 29 September 1815, Smiles, i, 282.

² Letter, 25 December 1815, Smiles, i, 288.

It is no argument to say that all this is in accordance with human nature. A novel, like poetry, should have for its hero a person superior to the common herd of men—one who evinces a higher tone of feeling. The same objection may be made to all Jane Austen's novels, and also to most of Crabbe's poetry. Surely works of imagination should raise us above our everyday feelings, and excite in us those *elans passageres* of virtue and sensibility which are exquisite and ennobling, and which, if they are not evanescent, would exalt our poor humanity in the scale of being.¹

Lady Shelley's appeal for a literature of improvement and inspiration is a not uncommon stand; what is worth remarking on is the exclusiveness of this position, its denial that there can be a literature of 'human nature', of Diana Vernons, and by implication, of Emmas, Mr. Woodhouses and Misses Bates. For some nineteenth-century readers, Jane Austen damned herself by the very fact of writing about ordinary people in ordinary circumstances; beyond this point, however well or badly she wrote was irrelevant; she had denied herself the possibility of great writing. The fallacy here is patently obvious to us today, but it lurks in a great deal of early nineteenth-century criticism, even in the private comments of Scott (No. 17a, c) and, most surprisingly, in so independent a critic as Lewes (see p.166). Implicitly or explicitly, it accounts for a continuing refusal to consider Jane Austen's novels as serious works of art.

The contemporary reviews and the private judgements of *Emma* are trivial beside Scott's article and the issues which it gives rise to. *Emma* attracted more attention than *Mansfield Park*, probably because it seemed immediately amusing and made easier reading; also perhaps for a quite accidental reason, its dedication to the Prince Regent. Jane Austen was informed that he was 'a great admirer of her novels: that he often read them, and had a set in each of his residences'.¹ By this time, Jane Austen's authorship was an open secret; 'in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love' Henry Austen had talked about her writing at least two years before, in September 1813.²

Generally speaking, the reviewers welcomed *Emma* as light relief. The *British Critic* (No. II) found it 'amusing, inoffensive and well principled', a change from 'fanatical' books by 'fanatical authoresses'. The *Monthly Review* (No. 10) recommended *Emma* for its simple 'ingredient', 'a strain of genuine natural humour' which made it a 'harmless amusement', a change from 'deep pathos or appalling horrors'. The *Gentleman's Magazine* (No. 12) concluded that it was 'Amusing, if not instructive'.

Two scraps of private comment, both from women novelists, are in the same vein. Writing to a friend, in July 1816, Miss Mitford remarked, 'By-the-way, how delightful is her *Emma* ! the best, I think, of all her charming works.'³ In the same year, Susan Ferrier wrote to a Miss Clavering: 'I have been reading *Emma*,

¹ Letter, 16 August 1819, *Diary of Frances, Lady Shelley* (1913), ed. R. Edgcumbe, ii, 64.

which is excellent, there is no story whatsoever, and the heroine is no better than other people; but the characters are all so true to life, and the style so piquant, that it does not require the adventitious aids of mystery and adventure.’⁴

Our third source of comment on *Emma* is Jane Austen’s own collection of ‘Opinions’ (No. 7); like the collection for *Mansfield Park* it was probably made soon after the book’s publication. By this time, Jane Austen’s readers had a general sense of the differences among the novels. *Pride and Prejudice* was regarded as the novel of wit, *Mansfield Park* as the novel of morality, with *Emma* somewhere between the two, and *Sense and Sensibility* rather left out of the reckoning, as if unworthy of consideration alongside the others. The views we meet in this collection are not unexpected, the untutored likes and dislikes of ordinary readers, with a preference for this character or that, and praise or criticism for the novel’s realism. Her brother Francis valued above all else ‘it’s peculiar air of Nature throughout’ (it is just possible he is referring to its open-airness rather than its imitative nature), whereas a Mrs. Guiton ‘thought it too natural to be interesting’. And Jane Austen had long before anticipated criticism of the novel’s heroine: ‘I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like’,¹ was her warning to the family before the novel was begun. Sure enough, Miss Herries ‘objected to my exposing the sex in the character of the heroine’, an echo of Miss Mitford’s disapproval of Elizabeth Bennet as a ‘pert’ and ‘worldly’ heroine.

Notably absent from these ‘Opinions’, as indeed from all the contemporary views of Jane Austen’s work, is any sign that her readers were conscious of her satire, an edge turned towards themselves. ‘Such good sense, & so very comfortable’, said Mrs. Cage of *Emma*. We might well hope to come across some comment on Jane Austen’s handling of the story, or on the remarkable structure of the work. But we have to rest content with Mrs. Sclater’s praise for the plot, that it was all ‘brought ... about very cleverly in the last volume’.

Northanger Abbey and Persuasion

These two works were published together in a set of four volumes in December 1817, five months after Jane Austen’s death. Her favourite brother, Henry Austen, who had acted for his sister in her publishing transactions, provided a ‘Biographical Notice of the Author’ (No. 13), the only source of information for her life and writing career until the *Memoir* of 1870.

¹ *My Aunt Jane Austen* (1952), Caroline Austen, p. 12.

² *Letters*, p. 340.

³ Letter, 2 July 1816, to Sir William Elford, L’Estrange, i, 331.

⁴ Letter, 1816, to Miss Clavering, *Memoir and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier* (1898), J.A.Doyle, p. 128.

The 'Notice' is a formal tribute to Jane Austen's private character and Christian virtues, as well as to her activity as a writer. Henry comments that other authors have enjoyed more resounding fame, 'But the public has not been unjust; and our authoress was far from thinking it so.' Scott's review-article had led the rising tide of critical appreciation, continued in the reviews of these two novels. There was a trifling notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1818), really an obituary, with only a few lines on the two novels:

The two Novels now published have no connexion with each other. The characters in both are principally taken from the middle ranks of life, and are well supported. *Northanger Abbey*, however is decidedly preferable to the second Novel, not only in the incidents, but even in its moral tendency.²

Apart from this, and a notice in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (No. 45), there were two substantial reviews, one in the *British Critic* (No. 14) and one by Archbishop Whately in the *Quarterly Review* for January 1821 (No. 16). The only known contemporary private comment is found in the correspondence of Maria Edgeworth with a Mrs Ruxton. In a letter of February 1818, she found fault with the end of *Northanger Abbey*:

The behaviour of the General in *Northanger Abbey*, packing off the young lady without a servant or the common civilities which any bear of a man, not to say gentleman, would have shown, is quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature.¹

The *British Critic* (No. 14) also criticized Jane Austen's portrayal of the General ('not a very probable character... not portrayed with our author's usual taste and judgement') on much the same basis, that Generals do not behave like this and it is wrong to suggest that they do; and the entire episode of Catherine's visit to the Abbey was held to show 'a considerable want of delicacy'. The continuation of Maria Edgeworth's letter is given to *Persuasion*:

excepting the tangled, useless histories of the family in the first 50 pages— appears to me, especially in all that relates to poor Anne and her lover, to be exceedingly interesting and natural. The love and lover admirably well-drawn: don't you see Captain Wentworth, or rather don't you in her place feel him taking the boistrous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa? And is not the first meeting after their long separation admirably well done? And the overheard conversation about the nut? But I

¹ *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), J.E.Austen-Leigh, ed. R.W.Chapman (1926), p. 157.

² Vol. lxxxviii, 52–53.

must stop, we have got no further than the disaster of Miss Musgrove's jumping off the steps.²

The reading is partial. Affected by the love-story and the sentiment, Maria Edgeworth finds in Jane Austen what she wants, and ignores or dismisses the rest. Here, it is a trivial matter; but it arises more significantly in the *British Critic* review.

The *British Critic* took the occasion to make some general observations on Jane Austen's art. These are much along the lines of its earlier comments (the *British Critic* had noticed the other novels, except *Mansfield Park*), distinguishing these works from gothic romances and epistolary novels, the usual form for sentimental fiction. The reviewer remarked upon Jane Austen's skill in character portrayal, in creating representative types which are finely discriminated, each with a personal idiom of character and speech, and rendered dramatically. Yet he is caught in a dilemma, the problem we have seen before, of feeling admiration for something that other voices tell him he should disapprove of. Good novels, and he includes these under review, are 'among the most fascinating productions of modern literature'; but, in general, the novel form is not sufficiently 'improving' for the reader.

There are other distinct limits to the praise that this reviewer feels able to allow Jane Austen. Our pleasure in her characters, he writes, is wholly on account of their reality, 'the unaccountable pleasure... which we derive from a simple imitation of any object'. In themselves, he continues, 'her characters have no kind of merit'. The 'follies' and 'natural imperfections' she portrays are treated with 'good-humoured pleasantry', drawn so accurately that we laugh at 'the ridiculous truth of the imitation, but without ever being incited to indulge in feelings, that might tend to render us ill-natured, and intolerant in society'. Thus, he concludes, Jane Austen is no satirist.

This reviewer seems to glimpse the implications of Jane Austen's critical vision, and, as he does so, to deny it, in an awkwardly contrived argument, whose logic, for what it is worth, runs counter to his obvious enjoyment of her writing. There is an equally artificial or wilful misunderstanding of the meaning of *Persuasion*. He warns his readers against the story's 'moral': 'that young people should always marry according to their own inclinations and upon their own judgement'. Similarly, the *Gentleman's Magazine* hinted darkly at its unwelcome 'moral tendency'. Yet the moral theme of *Persuasion*, in so far as it can be spelt out, is spelt out by Jane Austen in the penultimate chapter with almost painful care, as if she were expecting to be misunderstood.

Why, then, this misreading? Not, I think, because the reviewer in the *British Critic* was an ass, but because the novels of Jane Austen called for a freedom of

¹ Letter, 21 February 1818, Edgeworth, ii, 5–6.

² *Ibid.*

response which her audience, private readers and critics alike, were not yet ready to give. In particular, I suspect that Jane Austen's contemporary readers were not ready to accept her disconcerting account of the ways and values of their own society. Professor D.W. Harding has suggested that 'her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked; she is a literary classic of the society which opinions like hers, held widely enough, would undermine'. This is an arguable contention and some modern critics have rejected it. Nonetheless, I believe that it finds support in a number of the quotations and documents presented in this volume. The failure of Jane Austen's contemporaries to identify the force and point of her satire can be attributed in part to their disquiet at its implications. Some of her readers objected to what they could recognize as her attack upon the cherished values of romantic fiction. Others surely must have recognized that the fools and villains of Jane Austen's novels were uncomfortably close to themselves, their friends and neighbours. This was clear enough to Scott: 'her dramatis personae conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the reader may recognize as ruling their own and most of their acquaintances' (No. 8).

This account of Jane Austen's immediate reception closes with Whately's review-article of 1821 (No. 16). Following the convention of the *Quarterly Review*, Whately uses the editorial 'we', enabling him to refer freely to Scott's still anonymous 1816 review of *Emma*, in particular to take up Scott's category, the 'modern novel', with its realistic presentation of ordinary middle-class life. Whately argues that with this literary innovation there had come a similar advance in criticism; that the novel could now be taken seriously because it was capable, in its imitative capacity, of giving a 'correct' and instructive view of everyday life: 'it guides the judgment, and supplies a kind of artificial experience'. Whately is careful to explain what he means by a 'correct' view, which turns on the distinction between the terms *natural* and *probable*. It is an Aristotelian argument: the novel is a kind of 'fictitious biography', giving us 'the general, instead of the particular... the probable instead of the true', concentrating the result of 'wide experience' into 'small compass'. Had this analysis been read more intelligently, some of the late nineteenth-century critics might not have made the mistake of assuming that the confines of Jane Austen's fictional scene marked the limit of her achievement, the fallacy that novels written about ordinary, everyday life can themselves be no more than ordinary, everyday writing.

Whately's Jane Austen is fundamentally a serious writer whose morality and values are communicated implicitly, wholly in terms of her fiction, quite unlike the didactic method of Maria Edgeworth, which he analyses. Then follows his closely-argued discussion of Jane Austen's technique, these few pages which we meet again and again in later essays, elaborated and re-worded, or sometimes borrowed with little change, especially the sections dealing with her *economy* in the handling of plot and action, and her capacity to effect minute yet significant discriminations amongst a range of similar characters.

Finally, it is interesting to have his estimate of the individual novels. *Northanger Abbey* is dismissed swiftly but not unfairly. While *Mansfield Park* is his favourite, *Persuasion* is for him the finest of Jane Austen's works. Although his commentaries on the extracts from this last novel are perceptive, in his final pages, treating the theme of *Persuasion*, we seem to be led from a review into a sermon, perhaps Whately's highest tribute to his sense of Jane Austen's worth.

IV

1821 TO 1870

In following the example of Scott, Whately seemed to be laying the foundations for a serious critical approach to the novel in general, and to the works of Jane Austen in particular. But there were no critics capable of continuing their ideas. As far as the general public was concerned, the 'society' novels of Lytton and Disraeli, with their snobappeal and glamour, made Jane Austen's England look dowdy and old-fashioned. Certainly she was less interesting to novel-readers of the '30s and '40s, before whom was opening a new world in Dickens and Thackeray, and later in the century, in Trollope and George Eliot.

Perhaps, then, there are no real grounds for complaint. Jane Austen was virtually ignored because there was too much else to read. In contemporary novels the public could meet the problems of Victorian Britain—its poverty, its social and political inequality, its crisis of belief—areas of experience which were unknown to Jane Austen or which she chose to ignore. Where there is suffering in her novels, it is the suffering of individuals, or at most, of families, and always confined to the personal and domestic crises of the middle classes. Their pangs of love, their shocks of self-discovery and so on are affecting, but relieved of the basic distresses of hunger, of cold, of homelessness, of servitude; their problems are less stark, less typical of the sufferings of ordinary humanity. By this argument, which stands, with some justice, behind much Victorian thinking, Jane Austen was seen to be a relatively unimportant writer, drawing the comedy of manners of a past age. That she was a critic of that society was a truth that went unobserved until Simpson's essay of 1870.

The size of Jane Austen's reading public between 1821 and 1870 is difficult to estimate, but we can safely describe it as minute beside the known audience for Dickens and his contemporaries. The novels were relatively successful during her lifetime. Yet after her death, and the publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1817, her popularity seems to have declined almost immediately, the next edition of the novels being in Bentley's *Standard Novels* series, 1833. This was a cheap reprint series at six shillings a volume, compared with the price of 15s., 18s. or 21s. a three-volume set, the form in which Jane Austen's novels originally appeared, and which the circulating libraries had a vested interest in maintaining, since it encouraged novel-readers to borrow rather than buy.