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JANE AUSTEN

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*Edited by*  
B. C. SOUTHAM

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## 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.

a heroine whom no one but myself will much like',<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Vol. lxxxviii, 52-53.

(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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

<sup>1</sup> Letter, 21 February 1818, Edgeworth, ii, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*