

The Global Jane Austen

The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe

Edited by Anthony Mandal and Brian Southam.
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“[*Pride and Prejudice*] was translated during the worst war ever to befall mankind. It is said that the German people do not know the mentality of the inhabitants of the British Islands and that this ignorance has contributed to estimating the characters of the Britons wrongly. . . . *Pride and Prejudice* shall now by means of this translation give German readers insight into a world which . . . is quintessentially English and will always remain so.

The above quote, taken from the introduction to one of the various editions of Austen’s novels reprinted in Germany during the First World War, points to the major reason why her works were traditionally read in the seventeen nations that comprise the impressive arena of study for *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe*. Underlying the European interest in Austen was undeniably the idea of her as an author whose works encapsulated the elusive quality called “Englishness” and whose inimitable narrative voice was capable of creating in her continental readers an intuitive sympathy for the Anglo-Saxon character and its supposed eccentricities of behavior. However, the selection of the novels of Jane Austen to further understanding among nations during the Great War, rather than, say, those of Walter Scott, which enjoyed considerably greater popularity in Germany during the century that preceded 1914, is interesting, since it attests to the phenomenon that

Anthony Mandal, in his excellent introduction to the volume, describes as the condescending attitudes of Austen’s early European critics, who somewhat perversely lauded her fiction for its (“English?”) “smallness” and “narrowness,” thereby dismissing any possible claim to historical and cultural scope that European readers took for granted and would not have thought to deprecate in Scott’s romances.

History is, of course, the major factor, facilitator or stumbling block, in the reception of Austen in Europe. Thus, the modest interest accorded Austen’s novels on the European continent in the nineteenth century tended to be concentrated in countries which, after the wars of Napoleon, were closest to Britain in considering themselves to be at the forefront of social, artistic and industrial progress—France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands. In the twentieth century, the European Austen revival started in earnest after the Second World War, as efforts towards European unity led again to an increasing interest in issues of national character, comparative studies, and cultural exchanges. Also, Soviet-era countries promoted Austen as critiquing capitalism and women’s oppression, a view that found supporters outside of socialist societies in the 1970s. Ultimately, Austen’s popularity in Europe reached new heights in the 1990s, the result of the “Austenmania” created by British and North American costume dramas and film adaptations that were as popular in the new Eastern countries of the European Union as elsewhere. However, as Professor Mandal conclusively argues, the different stages and developments in the history of Austen’s reception in Europe have added up to a puzzling incongruity, a “Janus-like” Austen, who “looks back to a halcyon era of manners and morality, and forward to continued female emancipation.” (Not so different, some would argue, from the conflicting portrayals of Austen as either conservative or modern which continue to exist in Anglophone contexts!)

Austen’s enduring legacy and universal fame



In the age of “global” Jane Austen, when her novels are translated, adapted, and disseminated to international audiences via many different media, traveling with ever greater ease across cultures and disciplines, the study of her reception around the world and through the ages is becoming of increasing interest to her readers. For this reason this collection of essays, part of *The Athlone Critical Traditions Series: The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe*, is extremely timely. Mandal and Southam have assembled an impressive array of well-researched studies of Austen’s growing reputation in Europe, which cover the vast historical and literary-cultural territories that lie between the first Swiss, French-language translation of Austen’s work in 1813 (extracts from *Pride and Prejudice*) and the Estonian version of *Lesley Castle* in 2006. Each contribution stands on its own, enabling readers to delve into the history of Austen’s increasing popularity in a particular country, while the exhaustive timeline, which charts the pan-European reception of Austen from 1775 to the present day (a stroke of genius), and the introduction by Professor Mandal provide the all-important overview of the vast subject matter of the book. As we approach the two hundredth anniversary of the foreign reception of Austen’s peerless novels, we are fortunate to be able to welcome this fine new contribution to the important tradition of scholarship that explores and assesses the amazing phenomenon of Austen’s enduring legacy and universal fame.

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