The Rage for Recognition

Private Sphere to World Stage from Austen to Eliot

By Elizabeth Sabiston.
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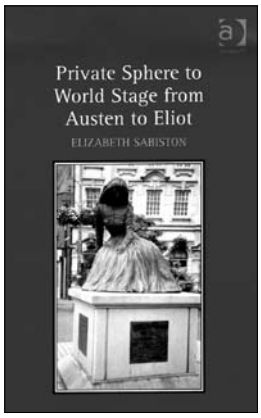
Reviewed by Joseph Wiesenfarth.

Women write. Whether they are authors or characters created by the authors, women write. That is why Jane Austen is here. She writes and at least one of her characters speaks about writing, if only for a chapter, which gives Elizabeth Sabiston an opportunity to write about *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. But Sabiston's book is about more than Austen, who claims one chapter of it. She says her book is about "female rage, ranging from the 'regulated hatred' of Jane Austen against paternal tyranny and the patriarchy, to the Brontës' anger verging on madness and obsession, again against the patriarchy, to Gaskell's and Stowe's moral indignation directed at the exploitation of both working-class women and female slaves. At the end of the nineteenth century, the usually cautiously optimistic, philosophic George Eliot created a vividly destructive, almost self-destructive heroine who is out of control" (191). Space will limit my discussion to Jane Austen, but each of Sabiston's chapters deserves attention. Perhaps what I say about the Austen chapter will suggest the methodology of the others.

Sabiston enjoys what she is doing. She is very well read indeed. She can make an analogy any time it strikes her fancy to do so. She also likes an occasional diagram. She especially likes footnotes. Indeed, there are one hundred footnotes in the Austen chapter alone. A few occupy more than half a page. But strangely enough the comments on Austen draw on no scholarship or criticism since the millennium; thus we hear nothing of Emily Auerbach's *Searching for Jane Austen* (2004), which is brilliant on *Northanger Abbey*, or Jon Spence's *Becoming Jane Austen* (2003), which is poignant in situating *Persuasion* in Austen's love for Tom Lefroy. This is to mention only two of the many books on Jane Austen published since 2000. Still there are many authors for Sabiston to allude to and many critics for her to contend with in her discursive footnotes, which show that she is quite comfortable with Austen's novels altogether.

She wants us to understand that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen's famous defense of the novel against those who think it a frivolous form of literature is a defining moment for women's writing. Hardly anyone would deny that. But Sabiston is herself so certain of its importance that she makes exaggerated claims. She contends, for instance, that Henry James's "*Washington Square* is a reworking of *Northanger Abbey*, whose plot turns on a misunderstanding about the heroine's wealth, which makes her the potential prey of the stupid would-be rake John Thorpe" (17). The analogy goes on for a paragraph, but offers little by way of convincing evidence. The most significant problem with such an attribution of influence, however, is that there is no evidence anywhere that James ever read *Northanger Abbey*, although we do know that he read *Pride and Prejudice, Emma,* and *Persuasion*. Moreover, in 1965, Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley demonstrated James's indebtedness to Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, which he both read and reviewed, in his writing of *Washington Square*. Sabiston makes an even more problematic attribution when she asserts that "Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw,* in which the governess/narrator may, in fact, be herself mad, undoubtedly owes a substantial debt to both *Northanger Abbey* and *Jane Eyre*" (30). I find that there is rather too much use of such words as "obviously," "doubtless," "undoubtedly" and phrases like "I believe," "I suspect," "one feels sure" throughout this book. They reflect Sabiston's wide reading and her constantly seeing one character, plot, or book that is *like* another (in a discussion of *Daniel Deronda* seven such *likes* appear on page 178). Their purpose in showing the wide relevance of fiction by women is admirable, but not always convincing.



Women write.

Anne Elliot and Captain Harville, toward the end of *Persuasion*, discuss the virtue of fidelity in love. Is it greater in men or women? Although Captain Benwick, having been engaged to Harville's recently deceased sister, will soon marry Louisa Musgrove, Harville defends men's fidelity. He argues that literature stands on the side of men in this matter: "all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse . . . I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say about woman's inconstancy." Anne replies: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands." The irony is that Wentworth is at that moment writing Anne a love-letter lamenting his inconstancy to her and drops the pen he writes with even as she speaks. Of course the genius of the passage is that it is written by a woman, by Jane Austen. Whether it also proves, as Sabiston suggests, that "Anne Elliot is a 'Self-Portrait of a Lady as Artist'" (54) is another question. But there is no doubt about Jane Austen's art at all.

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