Critics, Janeites, and Austenmaniacs

Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World

By Claire Harman.
Henry Holt and Company, 2009. xxi + 277.
31 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. $26.00

Review by William D. Reeves.

Claire Harman's delightful account of Jane Austen's rise to fame focuses on her popularity rather than the critics' appreciation of her work. Harman begins with a straightforward biography, then turns to how Austen's relations preserved and gradually disbursed the precious remains of her writings. She argues that Cassandra, rather than being criticized for burning most of her sister's letters, should be complimented for saving any of them. She makes this observation based on her knowledge of 19th century attitudes respecting the privacy of personal letters. Most people destroyed them. Nevertheless, Harman seems to endorse E. M. Forster's point that Austen's letters hardly needed to be saved; they "had not the magic that outlasts ink."

Harman's most distinctive argument is that Austen could be "an assertive businesswoman." Brother Henry's sickness at the end of 1815 gave Jane the opportunity to bargain directly with her new publisher, the famous John Murray. He would not offer enough for the copyright to *Emma,* so Jane concluded, "it will end in my publishing for myself, I dare say." It did, and in letters to Murray Jane kept after the press to be quick. Later in the book, Harman points out that of the 2,000 *Emma*s published, Murray remaindered over 500.

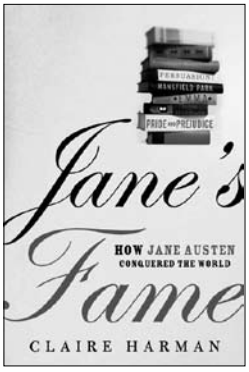
Juliet McMaster and Diana Birchall in mask celebrating at the AGM.

In the 1820s, Austen was out of print and almost out of mind. Nevertheless, as the 19th century progressed she slowly gained in publication and popularity. After the publication of the family's *Memoir* in 1870, attention soared and by 1890 the first wave of Janeites had appeared. Intellectual appreciation of Jane's work in the 19th century was not widespread, but it was deep. Her advocates included Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Babington Macaulay, and Benjamin Disraeli, who confessed to reading *Pride and Prejudice* seventeen times.

Janeites have long hoped that Austen would take a rightful place next to or near William Shakespeare on the scale of greatness. It is somewhat ironical today to find that Harman thinks fame itself is the only true connection between the two. This fame is not intellectual; it is "popularity, accessibility, and impact on readers' affections." True blue Janeites, like myself, must be offended!

After World War I, the lexicographer and Clarendon Press editor Robert William Chapman turned his attention to preserving the texts of one of England's great writers—Jane Austen. After years of work, in 1923 Oxford's Clarendon Press published the first complete scholarly edition of any English novelist. This five-volume masterpiece has been superseded, but it must always be remembered that this *The Novels of Jane Austen* lifted her from the clasp of the Janeites and mere popularizers to the proper level for critical analysis. Thus, Chapman laid the groundwork for the swelling academic analysis that in itself ended up causing, near the end of the 20th century, a second wave of adulation.

Harman finds that in 1939 Mary Lascelles's "intelligent speculation about Austen's conduct of her career and her analysis of Austen's style broke new ground critically and biographically." A year later, D. W. Harding pushed Austen fans to see Austen's irony in greater clarity.



Quickly came the work of Q. D. Leavis, who demonstrated that Austen was well aware of the evil of the world and of many dramatic incidents in it, but that Austen deliberately limited her scope for artistic reasons.

A subtopic of the book is the continuous effort to find a likeness of Jane Austen. Harman details many efforts but little success. The one likeness is the Cassandra sketch of 1810. To beautify it in keeping with her somewhat growing fame, in 1869 the family asked James Andrews to do a watercolor makeover of the Cassandra sketch that eventually ended up in the publication of the *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870). The limits of recent absurdity were reached with the distribution of untitled still photographs of attractive actress Olivia Williams in bonnet with quill, for all the world Jane Austen.

In her last chapter, Harman discusses the film and television treatment of Jane Austen. Sue Birtwistle's production of the BBC's 1995 miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice* launched "Austenmania," the modern version of Janeism. The various film versions have not been completely satisfying. Harman points out that most of Austen's intelligence has been lost in the translation to film. Jane's fame, ever more widespread, becomes ever thinner. For a look at Jane's popularity among the intellectuals, read Susannah Carson's *A Truth Universally Acknowledged: 33 Great Writers on Why We Read Jane Austen* (2009).

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