

England in Jitters

Reading Jane Austen

By Mona Scheuermann.
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Review by Joseph Wiesenfarth.

This is a well written book. Its thesis is that Jane Austen's novels reflect the pervading moral sensibility that was set out in contemporary conduct books: "Morality for Austen's class is the glue that allows society to hold its shape, especially in the face of all the threats to the social order." The works of writers like Hannah More and Thomas Gisborne are prominently used to elicit these values. To bring them to the fore, Mona Scheuermann opens her book with three chapters on *Mansfield Park* followed by one each on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. She closes with a chapter entitled "The World of Jane Austen."

In one footnote she tells us that Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* "is still indispensable." In another she indicates in detail how she thinks Claudia Johnson misreads *Mansfield Park* in *Women, Politics and the Novel*. In brief, *Reading Jane Austen* gives us a conservative novelist who finds her own carefully "lopt & cropt" *Pride and Prejudice*, in Scheuermann's words, too "frothy" and "too light in its outlook" to be her favorite work. This is a strained reading of "too light & bright & sparkling" in an Austen letter that is blatantly ironic in calling for a chapter of "solemn specious nonsense" to improve *Pride and Prejudice*. But it allows Scheuermann to suggest that Austen preferred *Mansfield Park* to its

predecessor and that, in writing it, she was of the same mind as the authors of the conduct books. Scheuermann, however, says nothing of how Austen's family life shaped her fiction, which Jon Spence showed so persuasively in *Becoming Jane Austen*. She says nothing about how the juvenilia skewered every convention that the conduct books celebrate, which Emily Auerbach showed so persuasively in *Searching for Jane Austen*. Spence and Auerbach present a very different Jane Austen from Scheuermann's for readers to engage with and enjoy. Indeed, if Ford Madox Ford is correct in positing in *The March of Literature* a Jane Austen who "achieves . . . a gayer, more lucid reality" than Richardson because she does not have his "moral preoccupation[s]" and that "you must go back to Chaucer before you will find her spiritual counterpart," then Scheuermann is reading another novelist altogether.

Her final chapter, "The World of Jane Austen," shows England as "a jittery nation," unlike the world that we find in the novels. Those jitters arise from the French Revolution of 1789 and remain a part of life through the wars with France from 1793 to 1815. During the better part of Austen's lifetime (1775–1817) there is an enemy without that produces an enemy within with its radical ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Consequently, the government has spies everywhere. Moreover, the economy of England is changing with the rise of artisans and craftsmen. The industrialization of the work place has led to the crowding of cities where workers agitate for better living conditions and higher wages. Shortages of manpower lead to citizens being impressed and forced to serve in the military. Mutinies occur in the navy like those at Spithead and Nore. There are crop failures and food shortages, with the poor suffering more than the rich. But the rich are taxed again and yet again. Discontent with government is everywhere. England therefore winds up "fighting two wars at the same time": one at home and one abroad. Thomas Paine, insisting on the "equality of man," seems almost as dangerous as Napoleon. No

wonder then that England is jittery. No wonder that, as Sir Samuel Romilly finds, "among the higher orders" there is "a horror of every kind of innovation." Those higher orders, of course, are the subject of Jane Austen's novels.

Beginning with Sir Thomas Bertram and going on to Fitzwilliam Darcy and George Knightley, we learn how a rich land-holder should conduct his life and with whom in society he should associate. The decided exception to dutiful gentlemen is the spendthrift Sir Walter Elliot, who is displaced by Admiral Croft as earned money becomes as socially acceptable as inherited wealth. In each of these novels the conservative code of conduct that is upheld is the same one that Scheuermann finds in the works of Gisborne and More. She sees the events of the time that unnerve England totally neglected by Austen, forgetting as she does so that there is a military presence of one kind or another in all six novels, which quietly indicates their author's awareness of the parlous state of the nation. But for Scheuermann, Austen's "is an attempt to hold still a particular, threatened . . . way of life." Her novels are "romances, . . . that is, escapist fiction." They are "a romantic rather than a realistic rendering" of life. Perhaps, but I'm not convinced. Personally, I prefer Ford's sense of the novels: "Jane Austen was neither romanticist nor realist, she was just 'novelist' as the North Star is the North Star."

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In Memoriam

Jon Spence, Austen biographer and scholar, died at his home in Australia on June 20, 2011. He will be missed by his many friends in the Jane Austen Society of Australia.