

**“Oh! I am delighted with the book!”**

## **Northanger Abbey: An Annotated Edition.**

By Jane Austen; edited by Susan J. Wolfson.

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. 363 pages.

105 color illustrations; 1 map. Hardcover. \$35.00.

Review by Janine Barchas.

The latest installment of “The Jane Austen Annotated Editions” from Belknap Press of Harvard University Press offers up just the type of sumptuous reading experience that we’ve come to expect from this series. *Northanger Abbey* is the fifth novel in the series, with *Mansfield Park* promised as sixth and last in 2015. Smartly annotated by Susan J. Wolfson, the refashioned *Northanger Abbey* shows off this series’ hallmark production values.

Printed in the series’ distinctive, upsized, square format on thick creamy paper, the *Northanger Abbey* text is richly illustrated with paintings, museum-quality photographs, and colorful Regency prints. A pleasure to turn, these luxurious pages will satisfy even the most book-hungry Janeite—and at a reasonable price. This is just the type of chocolate-box of a book that you will want to savor while curled up on the sofa. Or, to put it another way, this paper edition is everything that a Kindle, bless its little electronic chip for convenience and cost, is not.

This beauty of an edition also has muscle and brains. The many illustrations Wolfson provides are not gratuitous but work in tandem with her contextual annotations to facilitate a better understanding of both *Northanger Abbey*’s imagined world and Austen’s real one—without making you get up from that sofa to Google a term or allusion. Whether you are a first-time reader of Austen’s mock-Gothic novel or a committed repeater, you will find yourself eagerly sampling this edition’s bounteous margins. Along with the expected family portraits and familiar views of Bath there are also

lesser-known prints and photographs of costumes, objects, architecture, art, and manuscripts.

Although her images and notes are numerous, Wolfson is not heavy-handed and wields her role as editor with a light touch. Her lively introduction ranges expeditiously across the terrains of composition and reception histories, demonstrating how Austen “takes the pulse of the times.” Wolfson’s witty commentary shares with Austen’s own narrator a sense of fun that is rare in an editor, a role usually associated with unforgivable acts of humorless historical correction or persnickety explanation. Putting aside Wolfson’s fondness for the rhetorical question and the oft-repeated phrase “frame-breaking,” her editorial voice is fresh and jargon-free even when it rehearses accepted academic wisdom. Fundamental explanations of tone and content in *Northanger Abbey* are salted with unexpected comparisons to Harriet Smith in *Emma* (hailed as Catherine Morland’s intellectual twin), the “sucker punch” wit of Oscar Wilde, and “Wollstonecrafted logic.”

Wolfson is also to be commended for her relative transparency (relative to other editors in this same series) of professional editorial practices. The “Note on the Text” not only identifies the specific copy of the first edition, dated December 1817, that she used as her copytext, but the Postscript to the Introduction confesses the practice of silently correcting “obvious flubs.” Having retained original spelling and punctuation, Wolfson dares to strike out on her own with “slightly more conservative principles” than practiced by Chapman and others. She claims that she offers “fresh considerations” in the editorial handling of the text, but because her local adjustments are hidden and not acknowledged in individual notes (in such silence lies the bibliographical rub) her otherwise meticulous *Northanger Abbey* is unlikely to become the next scholarly edition of reference.

With so many riches, it seems almost ungrateful to mention missed opportunities.

But in a novel that assiduously tracks its characters through Bath’s city streets and environs

(and Wolfson acknowledges Austen’s topographical fidelity in her notes), a reader of this otherwise richly augmented edition could benefit from more, and more detailed, maps of how Bath looked in Austen’s time. With an illustration budget that allows for color images of a “turban,” “bow window,” and “hyacinth,” more might have been done to satisfy current curiosity about Austen’s geographical precision. Because this is the only volume in the Annotated Austen series advertised as sporting “1 map,” I was hoping for a facsimile of a turn-of-the-19th-century folding map of Bath familiar to Austen. I remain unsure which unique feature “1 map” refers to; is it really the diminutive 4 x 4 map of Bath on page 76?

Similarly, a handful of illustrations reach for odd specimens. For example, Wolfson glosses Mrs. Allen’s comical satisfaction that “the lace on Mrs. Thorpe’s pelisse was not half so handsome as that on her own” with an exemplar of this style of long coat. While the nearby picture of a pelisse is welcome, why show a random survivor on a fashion museum mannequin when Jane Austen’s own photogenic pelisse survives intact in Hampshire? But perhaps this is mere quibbling.

In sum, Wolfson’s smart and gorgeous new edition of *Northanger Abbey* is a must-have for anyone who looks forward to reading or rereading this novel in time for its bicentenary. You are in for a treat.

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