

Jane Austen and the *Athenaeum*

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The *Athenaeum* was a weekly magazine founded in London in 1828. As “the only *independent* literary paper of the day,” it tried to achieve “freedom from every bias” and catered to “the lovers of literature and the true freedom of the press.”¹ It was a welcome change from the politically-minded literary journals of Jane Austen’s time, and it deservedly rose to become one of the most popular periodicals in Victorian Britain.

An article entitled “Jane Austen” appeared in the *Athenaeum* in the summer of 1831, just fourteen years after the novelist’s death. It was the second piece in a series on “Literary Women.” Although this article has been neglected by modern readers, it contains some of the best early criticism of Jane Austen, and helps us to understand how enlightened contemporaries might have responded to her works.

The anonymous reviewer for the *Athenaeum* regards Jane Austen as a well-adjusted, successful woman, at home in the society of her time. He² does not share the attitude of many recent critics who present Jane as a kind of covert revolutionary or aggressive malcontent. He notes that from childhood she profited from “two influences, calculated to mature female intellect in the happiest manner—rural life, and domestic intercourse at once polished, intellectual, and affectionate.” In his mind, Jane Austen’s irony and satire seemed to be expressions of the best and most civilized attributes of the society she lived in—rather than expressions of rebellion against that society. He sees no contradiction, therefore, between “the benevolence of her temper, and the polish of her manners in daily life,” on the one hand, and on the other her “peculiar forte” of “delineating folly, selfishness, and absurdity.” Far from being an antagonist of her society, Jane Austen is a supporter of its higher values, according to this critic.

It is interesting that the reviewer finds the characters of the six novels to be realistic imitations of people who “may be met in the street, or drank tea with at half an hour’s notice.” Apparently the faults and virtues and idiosyncracies depicted in her work were fairly typical of life in an English village in her time. “Miss Austen,” we are told,

was a thorough mistress in the knowledge of human character; how it is acted upon by education and circumstance; and how, when once formed, it shows itself through every hour of every day, and in every speech to every person. Her conversations would be tiresome but for this; and her personages . . . would excite no interest. But in Miss Austen’s hands we see into their hearts and hopes, their motives, their struggles within themselves; and a sympathy is induced, which, if extended to daily life and the world at large, would make the reader a more amiable person.

Yet the writer in the *Athenaeum* also criticizes the first five novels for their relative lack of inspiring characters, of explicit Christian moralizing, and of Romantic imagination:

We think some of Miss Austen's works deficient in delineations of a high cast of character, in an exalted tone of thought and feeling, a religious bias that can be seen as well as understood; Miss Austen seemed afraid of imparting imagination to her favourites, and conceived good sense the *ultima Thule* of moral possessions. . . . We sometimes feel that Miss Austen's works deal rather too largely with the commonplace, petty, and disagreeable side of human nature—that we should enjoy more frequent sketches of the wise and high-hearted—that some of the books are too completely pages out of the world.

In her last novel, *Persuasion*, however, Jane Austen is allowed to have transcended these faults by attaining a "higher mood" and a "finer, more poetic, yet equally real tone."

Throughout his remarks the critic alludes to all six of the completed novels. He demonstrates a sensitive awareness of the complexities of

those very troublesome persons to draw, heroes and heroines. . . . The hero is not a suit of fashionable clothes, and a set of fashionable phrases; the heroine is not a ball-dress, a fainting fit, and a volume of poetry; they too are taken from life, and are distinguished one from another. Caroline Morland, artless and sometimes a little awkward; Emma Woodhouse, clever, spoiled, candid, faulty, and yet delightful; Fanny Price, with her meekness and humility, her loving, loveable, and most forgiving temper, her weeping-willow spirit that principle strengthens into decision and self-dependence. . . .

Very few readers of the early nineteenth century (or even of the late twentieth century) have been as adept as this reviewer in appreciating the realism and unity of Jane Austen's fiction. Perhaps his finest passage is a wide-ranging general discussion of the compactness, neatness, and economy, of the six novels:

The plots are simple in construction, and yet intricate in developement;—the main characters, those that the reader feels sure are to love, marry, and make mischief, are introduced in the first or second chapter; the work is all done by half a dozen people; no person, scene, or sentence, is ever introduced needless to the matter in hand—no catastrophes, or discoveries, or surprises of a grand nature are allowed—neither children nor fortunes are lost or found by accident—the mind is never taken off the level surface of life—the reader breakfasts, dines, walks, and gossips, with the various worthies, till . . . he absolutely fancies himself one of the company. Yet the winding up of the plot involves a surprise; a few incidents are entangled at the beginning in the most simple and natural manner, and till the close one never feels quite sure how they are to be disentangled. Disentangled, however, they are, and that in a most satisfactory manner.³

NOTES

¹ Advertisement for the *Athenaeum*, *Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle*, 17 March 1830, p. 86.

² The reviewer may just as likely have been a woman. I have preferred to use "he," mainly in order to distinguish between the reviewer and the novelist more easily.

³ Anon., "Literary Women: No. II; Jane Austen," in *The Athenaeum Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 27 August 1831, pp. 553-54. All readers of *Persuasions* will notice that the critic has mis-named one of Jane Austen's heroines.