

Austen and Aesthetics

Jane Austen and the Arts: Elegance, Propriety, and Harmony

Edited by Natasha Duquette and Elisabeth Lenckos.
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5 B/W illustrations. Hardcover \$80. eBook \$79.99.

Review by Kristen Miller Zohn.

This collection of fourteen essays reveals Austen's concern with the aesthetic theories of her time. The aim of Natasha Duquette and Elisabeth Lenckos, as stated in the promotional paragraph, is to present the case that Austen "confidently promot[ed] her own distinctly post-enlightenment aesthetic system." They explain in their introduction that her novels promote the idea that aesthetic delight and social virtue are powerfully connected.

The editors of *Austen and the Arts* promise a look at "Austen's engagement with diverse art forms, such as painting, ballet, drama, poetry, and music." Readers who are hoping for an examination of Austen's interaction with the visual and performing arts of her time will find this to be true in the first of three sections, which deals with "The Fine Arts in Austen's World: Music, Dance, and Portraiture." It is unexpected that a book with such a title would have only five illustrations, and they are all included in this first segment. Three of the volume's contributors are trained in the study of an art other than literature. Music professor Katherine L. Libin places the musical practice of Austen's family and her novels within the context of its role in female education. Classically trained ballet dancer and musician Erin Smith posits that the personalities of Austen's characters are revealed through their movement aesthetic, particularly while they are engaged in dancing. Art historian Jeffrey Nigro convincingly argues that although Cassandra Austen was an amateur portraitist, she was familiar with the artistic conventions of her time and she experimented with them in her images of Jane. Also in this section, an essay by Kelly M. McDonald

studies the musical performances of Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse as typical of accomplished amateurs of their time.

In her preface, "Jane Austen's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," Vivasvan Soni explains that the novels show "a sophisticated engagement with the eighteenth century's unique tradition of aesthetic thought," and it is this idea that is illuminated by the rest of the essays in the collection. Joanna Baillie, Fanny Burney, Stephanie Meyers, Ann Radcliffe, and Madame de Staël are invoked in the section "Austen and Romanticism: Female Genius, Gothicism, and Sublimity." The contributors compare Austen characters to "women of genius" ["Portrait of a Lady (Artist): *Persuasion* and *Corinne*" by Elisabeth Lenckos], comic stage heroines (Belisa Monteiro's "Jane Austen's Comic Heroines and the Controversial: Pleasures of Wit"), tragic characters ("Exploring Literature's Transformative Power: Jane Austen, Joanna Baillie, and the Aesthetics of Moral Development" by Christine Colón), and (in an essay that seems out of place here), the lead character of a popular novel of our own time ("Jane Austen's Influence on Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*" by Deborah Kennedy). Alice Davenport's "An Adaptable Aesthetic: Eighteenth-Century Landscape, Ann Radcliffe, and Jane Austen" is particularly notable for its lucid definition of the often-misunderstood term "picturesque" and for its extensive and comprehensive notes.

The final section, "Austen in Political, Social and Theological Context," provides a thorough summary of critical thought about one of the novels (J. Russell Perkin's "Aesthetics, Politics, and the Interpretation of *Mansfield Park*"), an exploration of the opinions of Austen and Rousseau on the significance of mirroring and self-awareness ("Reflections on Mirrors: Jane Austen, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Socio-politics" by Melora G. Vandersluis), and a look at "God as Artist" (Diane Capitani's "Augustinian

Aesthetics in Jane Austen's World"). Jessica Brown captures and emulates Anne Elliot's lyrical story in the finely-written "So Much Novelty and Beauty!":

Persuasion and the Spacious Aesthetic of Restraint." Brown explains that Anne's balance of passion and reason, and her restraint from either extreme, allows her to perceive and enjoy beauty and to be restored by it. Another highlight of the volume is "Delicacy of Taste' Redeemed: The Aesthetic Judgment and Spiritual Formation of Austen's Clergy-men Heroes" by Frederick and Natasha Duquette, an exploration of how the admirable clergymen in the novels change their views of art and beauty as they grow in spiritual and social consciousness. It is fitting as the final entry because it contains references to many authors mentioned in other essays, including Edmund Burke and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck. Moreover, the Duquettes take pains to include writers with whom we know Austen would have been familiar, such as the Rev. Thomas Sherlock; not every author in this volume makes such direct connections. That being said, many of the contributors do reference other essays within the collection, which leads to a richer experience for the reader.

While the title of this book might not have been the best choice for clarity's sake, the subtitle *Elegance, Propriety, and Harmony* effectively describes this exploration of Austen and the philosophy of aesthetics.

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