

Jane Austen and the Contemporary Scene

Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen

By Jocelyn Harris.

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Review by David Wheeler

Like most members of JASNA, I think that I know Jane Austen, but after reading Jocelyn Harris's latest book, I'm not so sure. Placing Austen historically is nothing new; critics have discussed Austen in relation to class, gender roles, literary marketplace, leisure activity, poverty and wealth. Harris, here, does something different. Extensively researched, *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen* uses the letters and journals of Fanny Burney, historical accounts of celebrities, and contemporary satire in Austen's England to suggest that the novels engage in a covert dialogue with their cultural environment. I use the word "suggest" consciously; Harris doesn't necessarily convince us of her many bold assertions. But, she doesn't have to convince. The suggestions are enough to change the way we read the novels.

Of the three terms in Harris's title, I find "celebrity" the most compelling. Even when Austen satirizes the royal princes by having unpleasant male characters—John Thorpe and General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, Tom Bertram and Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*—mimic princely behavior and mannerisms, she's concerned with public perception of their persons, rather than political policy. Harris rightly observes that

"celebrity" was a new-fangled concept in Jane Austen's time" and that "the burgeoning cult of celebrity . . . resulted largely from the explosion of print culture" That Austen read accounts of celebrities in newspapers and magazines, saw

caricatures of celebrities everywhere, and engaged in celebrity gossip herself can hardly be doubted. That she alluded to them and their scandals as a regular feature of her creativity is juicy indeed.

Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen divides into two sections—literary celebrity and royal (or, perhaps, political) celebrity. For Harris, contemporary literary celebrities were not Scott and Byron; rather, they were Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth. In considering Burney's influence on Austen, Harris identifies several parallels: that Fanny and her sister Susan in *Mansfield Park* share the names of Burney and her sister, for example. More interesting is Harris's speculation about the transmission of celebrity gossip. The Burneys were friends and neighbors of Austen's relative Cassandra Cooke. Mining Burney's letters and journals for detailed, often private information, Harris wonders whether these stories, these impressions were passed to Mrs. Cooke and then on to Austen who used them in her fiction, conjecturing, for example, that Fanny's misery at Mansfield intentionally mirrors Burney's lonely life at court. Harris considers the possibility that Mr. Price, Fanny's father, was modeled on Royal Marine Lt. Molesworth Phillips, "brutal husband to Susan Burney" and something of a celebrity himself because of his presence at the 1779 death of Captain James Cook. Perhaps justifying the space devoted to Cook, she declares that Austen's naval brothers "owed their careers to Captain James Cook." Cook's celebrity and death make for good stories, but the claim is a stretch. While both Austens trained under officers who sailed under Cook's command, neither knew him, Frank only four at Cook's death and Charles not yet born. Harris's chapter on Edgeworth's influence is much more directly literary. Focusing on the theatricals and on naval patronage, Harris provides insights to *Mansfield Park* and speculates that during the relatively long time between "completion" and publication, Austen reworked crucial scenes after reading

Edgeworth's *Patronage*.

Harris's three chapters on the royal family are fascinating. She draws upon contemporary caricatures of George (Prince of Wales, later Prince Regent and George IV) and William (Duke of Clarence, later William IV) to identify traits that appear satirically in Austen's novels: George's great interest in horses turning up in John Thorpe, his continual need for "retrenching" as a potential source for Sir Walter Elliot, and Clarence's long-term mistress Dorothy Jordan figuring as Elizabeth Bennet. The final chapter demonstrates that the celebrity of Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," produced contemporary considerations of race, slavery, and empire, topics that Harris discusses with regard to Austen and to the undeveloped Miss Lambe in *Sanditon*.

"In her own lifetime," Harris concludes, "Jane Austen was never a celebrity, but subsequent admirers have endowed her with all the trappings of celebrity culture." But we may misread her. Austen's advice that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" detaches her fiction from the world, and "after her death," Harris observes, "family members represented Jane as a quiet homebody." For many readers, therefore, Jane Austen is isolated, safely removed from controversies of personality or politics. Jocelyn Harris overturns that view of Austen and demonstrates just how connected the author was to her contemporary scene. Harris's work will hardly be the final word; more importantly, it will prompt scholars to penetrate deeper into her suggested connections.

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