

Mary WALDRON, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. x + 194, ISBN 0-521-65130-1.

It has been common for a while in Jane Austen studies to encounter discussions of Austen's achievement. Mary Waldron's *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* does not set out to do this, but in the course of exploring the relation between Austen's novels and the works of fiction she burlesqued, parodied, read and discussed with some members of her family, she indirectly shows what Austen's fiction has achieved. Waldron explores Austen's novels in the context of contemporary novel writing and offers a picture of Austen as an innovator, obsessed with fiction and bent on endowing it with the recognition it deserves. Her defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* (I, 5) immediately comes to mind, but Waldron shows this is not the only occasion on which Austen gives her opinion on fellow-novelists and the craft of fiction. One of the pleasures awaiting the reader of this book is in fact being reminded of Austen's comments on contemporary fiction writers, which are often deliciously ironic.

In order to show Austen's knowledge and opinion of the fiction of her time, Waldron often pays attention to the literary critic which hides in Austen's letters and unveils a keen-eyed commentator who easily spots stereotypes, whether in characters or events, and exposes them. She presents to us Jane Austen the reader objecting to and laughing at the 'unnatural', the 'improbable' and the 'absurd' — and, consequently, denying them a place in fiction. Waldron sees her critique of 'unnatural conduct' in fictional heroes and heroines as equally directed towards the lack of probability in the sentimental novel and the didacticism of anti-Jacobin fiction. Like Byron, Jane Austen could have said 'Cant is my abhorrence'. Abhorrence of literary cant and affectation in contemporary attitudes to novels is what Waldron sees as the driving force behind Austen's works. For Waldron, it is not very useful to place her fiction on the side of those defending tradition against change — as Marilyn Butler does in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* — since as a writer of novels she is consciously avoiding taking part in contemporary ideological debates. Moral education is not what Austen's novels aim at. Waldron has certainly got a strong point when she suggests that 'Fictional 'cant' is still the author's target' (p. 137), even as late as 1816, when she probably wrote her ironic *Plan of a Novel*.

Waldron's main objective is therefore to show that Austen's agenda is not a moral one, since to subvert and challenge contemporary fictional stereotypes is what she seems to have had in mind. In order to prove that this is the case, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* does not limit discussion to the six major novels. One must be grateful for the attention given in this book to the *Juvenilia*, *Sanditon* and other minor or unfinished works. More importantly, Waldron does not lump all these works together to be discussed in a separate chapter tucked away at the end of the book; instead, they are taken notice of at those points at which they chronologically belong. The benefits of this approach are easily appreciated; being discussed next to *Pride and Prejudice* turns *The Watsons* into another exploration of impoverished heroines with cultivated minds. The relation between the Catherines of *Catherine, or The Bower* and *Northanger Abbey* are also brought to our attention by being analysed in the same chapter. Waldron also places Austen's fiction firmly in its historical context and often

avails herself of comparison with contemporary novels such as Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer*, Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina*, Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine*, Mary Brunton's *Discipline* and several others. In this respect this book is certainly a blessing – it does what its title promises to do and it does it well, in clear, concise, elegant prose.

Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time is neatly organised into an introduction followed by seven chapters, each of which revolves around one of the novels, beginning with *Northanger Abbey* and concluding with *Sanditon*. If there is anything missing in this layout it is certainly a fully-fledged conclusion. Waldron has given the last chapter in the book a double function, since it contains the analysis of the novel Jane Austen left unfinished at her death, *Sanditon*, followed by a few concluding paragraphs to the whole book which seem hastily added at the end and give the impression of being little more than an afterthought. The reader is bound to feel that such a book as this asks for a conclusion in its own right. As it stands, the book lacks a space in which the findings of the previous chapters are assessed and seen in relation to each other.

In *Northanger Abbey*, as in other early experiments such as *Love and Friendship* and *Catharine*, the intention to burlesque and parody the novel of sensibility, French philosophy or conventional morality lie at the forefront but are not the only fictional aim. In these early experiments, Waldron detects in Austen an interest in demolishing fictional stereotypes and a taste for equivocal closures, for ambiguous endings. *Pride and Prejudice*, an early experiment itself which began as *First Impressions*, is shown to have a less conventional happy ending than it may seem, since marriage brings problems, rather than solves them, for Darcy who has to deal with unwelcome alliances. Marital peace between Elizabeth and Darcy is permanently at stake since, as Waldron foresees, Darcy will have to avoid Wickham and support Lydia for his wife's sake, keep Lydia and Kitty from quarrelling, cope with Mr. Bennet's unannounced visits, and try to prevent Mrs. Bennet from meeting Lady Catherine de Bourgh more often than strictly necessary, and this 'must have made the Pemberly guest-list extremely complicated' (p. 61) to handle. Neither Darcy's choice of a wife nor the apparently happy resolution of *Pride and Prejudice* seem to conform to the conventions of fiction.

For Waldron, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* seem to be the two novels which more closely engage with contemporary fictional stereotypes. The first of these is discussed in relation to Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (translated into English in 1761), Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* (1777) and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) whereas the second one is assessed against Sarah Burney's *Clarentine* (1798), Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) and Mary Brunton's *Self-control* (1810). *Sense and Sensibility* is not, according to Waldron, to be understood in terms of the dichotomy between the terms which conform its title, since what the novel does is to explore the slippery meaning of these words and show that the world is made up of different kinds of sense and sensibilities. Waldron also makes an interesting distinction between the 'unsentimental' present of the main plot and the 'sentimental' past encoded in the interpolation of Colonel Brandon's narrative about the two Elizas – but ignores, or forgets, that the sentimental past catches up with the present when Brandon has to go away in a rush and abandons his guests.

In a chapter entitled ‘The Frailties of Fanny’, Waldron shows how *Mansfield Park* is the novel in which Austen comes nearest to producing a prototypical fictional heroine, ‘the exemplary girl who battles with worldliness and vice, emerging ultimately victorious after innumerable tribulations, misunderstandings and accusations’ (p. 84), the fictional sister of Emmeline, Cecilia, Camilla or Belinda. Waldron also sees *Mansfield Park* as Austen’s response to the didacticism, artificiality and lack of realism of the fiction associated with the Evangelical movement, since she places Fanny amidst the same difficulties as the typical heroines of Evangelical novels but rejects the aid of improbable circumstances. Fanny cannot then be said to be a failed attempt on Austen’s part to draw the perfect heroine, nor the ‘prig-pharisee’ Reginald Farrer saw in her in 1917, and *Mansfield Park* cannot be taken for a dull artistic failure – either too didactic or unsuccessful in its didactic intention – if generation after generation of readers continue to enjoy it. For Waldron, *Mansfield Park* articulates the problems an Evangelical heroine faces – such as selfishness, jealousy and ill-feeling – when trying to behave according to strict patterns of rectitude. Her reading also requires us to see Edmund Bertram as the outlet through which Hannah More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* and other Evangelical novels are undermined, since he is meant to be the upright parson full of Evangelical piety and yet he falls in love with the unprincipled Mary Crawford. *Mansfield Park* is a *tour de force* in which the stereotyped hero and heroine, Edmund and Fanny, are put through situations which make them ‘lose their position as moral reference points’ (p. 95) and face moral chaos. With this novel, Austen liberates eighteenth-century fiction from the obligation to provide unambiguous moral endings. Waldron’s reading of *Mansfield Park* is one of the best achieved chapters in the book and provides the reader with new, stimulating thoughts on this complex novel in every sentence.

Waldron also reads *Emma* as a wilful subversion of fictional stereotypes. In *Emma*, Austen avails herself of a well-known heroine prototype – the deluded heroine – and weaves an intricate plot in which ‘none of the stock characters behaves exactly as might be expected’ (p. 113). Emma is handsome, but not vain; rich but not addicted to frivolous pleasures; and her father is not keen to get rid of her but rather is adamantly against marriage. A heroine like this will have difficulty in behaving in the expected manner, and it is quite clear why Austen thought no one but herself would like Emma. Yet, Waldron shows, other characters in the novel which apparently conform to contemporary fictional prototypes also fail to behave in expected, stereotypical ways. Austen populated *Emma* with ‘subverted versions of stock figures’ (p. 113).

Knowing that Austen’s fiction is not easy to appraise with a stroke or two of the critical pen, Waldron is more interested in asking questions than in providing answers. What was Austen aiming at when she wrote *Persuasion*? For Waldron, it is more fruitful to compare twentieth-century critical views with those printed in *The British Critic* in 1818, to conclude that attempts to pin down authorial intention in Austen’s novels often lead to bewildering paradoxes. Was Austen trying to support or to challenge contemporary conduct-theory about marriage? Pictures of perfection – as Waldron reminds us – made Jane Austen sick and wicked, so she created heroines to please herself. Her heroines, if tested against contemporary expectations, are far from exemplary. Her endings, particularly in *Persuasion*, are “a matter of luck rather

than judgement” (p. 137). The only moral the reader can draw out of *Persuasion* is, as Waldron puts it, that “Anything could have happened” (p. 140).

Sanditon, despite its unfinished state, beautifully illustrates what Waldron calls ‘the twin targets of Austen’s irony’ (p. 157), cant and contemporary ideas about novels. Attacking these is for Waldron the purpose of Austen’s fiction. Commentators of *Sanditon* come in two kinds: those who consider it a radical departure from previous novels in ‘subject, style and method’ (pp. 157-8) and those who stress its relation of continuity with the rest of Austen’s *oeuvre*. Most critics hold the resort itself, Sanditon, and Austen’s dislike for spa towns, as central to the plan of this novel. Waldron challenges this idea, arguing that it is not certain that Austen herself was against watering places. If she resented leaving Steventon, – which, as David Nokes has argued (1997: 220-28), is not known for sure – she seems nevertheless to have enjoyed Bath. Perhaps, it is our own dislike of contemporary Blackpool or Benidorm-like coastal developments that makes us transfer our feelings for such places onto their Regency equivalents. Waldron also reviews Austen’s opinion of another seaside resort, Weymouth, as it has reached us through a letter to Cassandra, but as is often the case, Austenian irony does not let us obtain an unambiguous conclusion about her feelings for holiday spots. Waldron reminds us, though, that Jane Austen, like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, seems to have liked Lyme. *Sanditon* the novel may not have been then geared towards exposing Sanditon the resort, the unsuccessful commercial enterprise which is meant to ‘enrich the greedy, pander to the vulgar enjoyment of the masses and ruin the landscape’ (p. 158) but rather to show Mr. Parker’s infinite capacity for self-deception – and self-deception has been a familiar theme in her previous novels. Sanditon is simply another ‘country village’ for ‘3 or 4 families’, and no different in this respect from Highbury or Meryton (p. 159). Waldron also challenges the notion that one of the new ingredients introduced by Austen in *Sanditon* is its concern with topography, since she shows, through examples taken from *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, that Austen often uses topography ‘as a powerful matrix for her characters’ states of mind’ (p. 160).

After enjoying Waldron’s shrewd analysis in *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time*, one is not reluctant to agree with her view that in an Austen novel ‘the narrative leaves questions open at the same time as appearing to answer them’ (p. 140). The reader is not offered a single view of things for approval. As the last chapter of *Persuasion* suggests, bad morality may happen to be coincidental with the truth. One of the conclusions the reader draws from reading Waldron’s book is that Jane Austen’s fiction is meant to entertain its readers rather than to provide them with ‘satisfying certainties’ (p. 115).

REFERENCES

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