The Rage for Recognition
Private Sphere to World Stage from Austen to Eliot

By Elizabeth Sabiston.
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Reviewed by Joseph Wiesenfarth.

Women write. Whether they are authors or characters created by the authors, women write. That is why Jane Austen is here. She writes and at least one of her characters speaks about writing, if only for a chapter, which gives Elizabeth Sabiston an opportunity to write about Northanger Abbey and Persuasion. But Sabiston’s book is about more than Austen, who claims one chapter of it. She says her book is about “female rage, ranging from the ‘regulated hatred’ of Jane Austen against paternal tyranny and the patriarchy, to the Brontës’ anger verging on madness and obsession, again against the patriarchy, to Gaskell’s and Stowe’s moral indignation directed at the exploitation of both working-class women and female slaves. At the end of the nineteenth century, the usually cautiously optimistic, philosophic George Eliot created a vividly destructive, almost self-destructive heroine who is out of control” (191). Space will limit my discussion to Jane Austen, but each of Sabiston’s chapters deserves attention. Perhaps what I say about the Austen chapter will suggest the methodology of the others.

Sabiston enjoys what she is doing. She is very well read indeed. She can make an analogy any time it strikes her fancy to do so. She also likes an occasional diagram. She especially likes footnotes. Indeed, there are one hundred footnotes in the Austen chapter alone. A few occupy more than half a page. But strangely enough the comments on Austen draw on no scholarship or criticism since the millennium; thus we hear nothing of Emily Auerbach’s Searching for Jane Austen (2004), which is brilliant on Northanger Abbey, or Jon Spence’s Becoming Jane Austen (2003), which is poignant in situating Persuasion in Austen’s love for Tom Lefroy. This is to mention only two of the many books on Jane Austen published since 2000. Still there are many authors for Sabiston to allude to and many critics for her to contend with in her discursive footnotes, which show that she is quite comfortable with Austen’s novels altogether.

She wants us to understand that in Northanger Abbey Austen’s famous defense of the novel against those who think it a frivolous form of literature is a defining moment for women’s writing. Hardly anyone would deny that. But Sabiston is herself so certain of its importance that she makes exaggerated claims. She contends, for instance, that Henry James’s “Washington Square is a reworking of Northanger Abbey, whose plot turns on a misunderstanding about the heroine’s wealth, which makes her the potential prey of the stupid would-be rake John Thorne” (17). The analogy goes on for a paragraph, but offers little by way of convincing evidence. The most significant problem with such an attribution of influence, however, is that there is no evidence anywhere that James ever read Northanger Abbey, although we do know that he read Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion. Moreover, in 1965, Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley demonstrated James’s indebtedness to Balzac’s Eugénie Grandet, which he both read and reviewed, in his writing of Washington Square. Sabiston makes an even more problematic attribution when she asserts that “Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, in which

Women write.

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