

Distance And Difference

Jane Austen's Anglicanism

By Laura Mooneyham White.
Ashgate, 2011. 215 pages.
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Review by Rachel M. Brownstein.

Charmingly, Laura Mooneyham White introduces the important subject of her book, Jane Austen's distance and difference, by inviting us to imagine her looking at us. Her preface recalls three texts written toward the end of Austen's life in which dead people come back—angrily—to life. The Musgrove ancestors in *Persuasion* scowl down from their frames at their giddier descendants; the narrator of *Sanditon* imagines Lady Denham's rich first husband comparing his portrait in miniature with the larger, more prominent likeness of his titled successor; and in a poem written days before Austen died, Saint Swithin rises from his tomb in Winchester to curse the traditional July races (courses) there with rain. "Behold me immortal," the Saint thunders. White's subject is the downside of immortality, her point that the immortal Jane would have been startled—scandalized even—by the lack of interest and knowledge today's readers have in what was so important to her, the Anglican Church.

Jane Austen's Anglicanism locates Austen's significant difference in religion, rather than, as usual, in different social and sexual mores, but as White shows, for the Austen family and the families in Austen's novels, daily life



Starting at left going clockwise: Kris Lester, Lynne Jacobs, Megan Lawen, Rosemary Coghlan, Lori Davis (with back to camera) at the ALM.

was closely bound up with the Church. The country gentry sustained the clergy with "livings" and with their sons: Jane's father and two of her brothers were clergymen. The habit of Christianity and the rhythms of the Christian calendar, daily prayers, and regular churchgoing informed domestic life, while the rhythms of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the repetitions of the liturgy informed thought. Of Jane Austen, White writes, "by my conservative calculation, she would herself have said the Lord's Prayer about 30,000 times." Religion was not the existential question and matter of (often agonized) personal choice it tends to be today. Contemporary Anglicans, even "cradle Episcopalians" like White herself, know a church very different from the one Jane Austen knew.

Central to the lives of the country gentry, it was casually corrupt and uninspired; virtuous enough clerics were guilty of absenteeism and enjoyed multiple livings. White convinces me that a reader of the novels should be aware of the importance of Anglicanism—that when Sir Walter Elliott reads the baronetage as "the book of books," he is specifically substituting that book for the Bible. Her knowledge of Church of England (and the novels and criticism) is impressive (although I would like to have learned a little more about the specifically Anglican form of Evangelicalism that Jane Austen said she considered espousing).

White persuades me that when Austen's characters retire to their rooms for "serious" reflection, it must be for prayer. And I agree that the lack of religious content in the novels is a function of the author's religious decorum, not her lack of religion. Chapter 3, "Austen and the Anglican Worldview," will be especially useful for students. But the Worldview described, in which hierarchy, providence, etc., rule, is easy to read in secular terms. Anglicanism, however central in Jane Austen's life, is only one of the elements—including the class system and England's military and economic success—that shaped it. White claims Jane Austen for Anglicanism partly by seeing

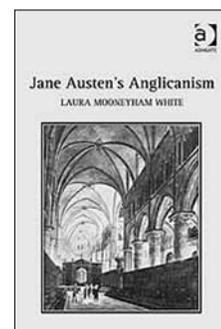
virtue as specifically Christian, and all aspects of pre-Darwinian thinking as Christian thinking.

The crucial argument about Austen's inner life turns on the question that has motivated most

commentary on this novelist since, at least, D. W. Harding wrote "Regulated Hatred": was Jane Austen a pious woman or a malicious one, a good or a bad person? (People don't ask that about male satirical novelists, or of women novelists who are not satirical.) Like many writers, White takes the funeral encomia of the Austen family much too seriously—also the goodness in general of the good Christian. On the other hand, she shrewdly reads Jane Austen's personal prayers as efforts to control an inclination to malice and levity.

The book concludes with a brilliant coda that compares *Emma* with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a comedy in a different style. It is illuminating to contrast the pairs of lovers, the spinsters, the clergymen, and the wit of these great works, but the conclusion White comes to seems to me all wrong. I don't think Emma's church wedding is only idealized; that Mrs. Elton does not attend the wedding seems to me less important than that Austen places Mrs. Elton's critique of it ("Very little white satin") in the penultimate sentence. As Laura Mooneyham White has shown, the earnestness Oscar Wilde would mock was not yet in place when Jane Austen wrote; it was not characteristic of either the novelist or the church in her time. Quite as the telling comparison with Wilde's play suggests, *Emma* is informed by the spirit and structure of comedy, not by ideology.

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LAURA MOONEYHAM WHITE



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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