

## Austen's Readers Through the Ages

### Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786–1945.

By Katie Halsey.

Anthem Press, 2012. viii + 290 pages.

Hardcover. \$99/£60.

Review by Susan Allen Ford.

Interest in how readers have received Jane Austen isn't new, as Katie Halsey points out, but recently it has seemed particularly to fascinate us: witness collections by Deidre Lynch (2000) and Anthony Mandal and Brian Southam (2007) as well as monographs by Emily Auerbach (2004), Kathryn Sutherland (2005), Annika Bautz (2007), Claire Harman (2009), Juliette Wells (2011), and, most recently, Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (2012, parts of which began appearing as early as 1996). Halsey's book, *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786–1945*, brings further attention and real insight to the subject of who read Jane Austen and how, as well as to how those readings were employed.

The title seems intentionally slippery. Halsey not only considers the readers of Jane Austen's fiction and the readers in her fiction but begins with a consideration of Jane Austen herself as a reader among readers. Part One focuses on attitudes toward novel-reading during Austen's life, her reading (in many genres), and the narrative tactics by which she forms or subverts bonds with her ideal readers. Part Two focuses on actual, historical readers: it describes the editions available, charts the development of attitudes toward (especially women's) reading through the nineteenth century, and analyzes different kinds of readerly engagement. Although Halsey periodically reminds us of the connection between the book's two parts by considering whether or to what extent Austen's historical readers took up the cues designed for her hypothetical readers, the two sections too often seem discrete.

Both sections provide much that's stimulating and enjoyable. In Part One, Halsey explores Jane Austen's family not merely as readers of her writing but as readers of each other's writing: sermons, verse, plays, essays, and, of course, fiction. That sense of a readerly community sets up the rest of the book. Austen, Halsey argues, learned to "exploit . . . the potential of shared reading." Some of what follows, however, though interesting, might be encountered elsewhere. Halsey argues that Austen both appropriates and subverts the language and the tropes of conduct literature, in the case of *Mansfield Park* critiquing domestic ideology through the gap between the comforting plot resolution and the discomfiting narrative voice. Her analysis of the "games of ingenuity" or "directed indirections" of Austen's style focuses on free indirect discourse, the blush, and "spectral texts" (Cowper's *The Task*, Crabbe's *Tales*) that haunt *Mansfield Park*. While all these topics fall under the rubric "invitations to a particular kind of hard reading," they don't provide enough new to be essential to the book's design.

Part Two provides a wealth of material, clearly presented. Although Halsey admits that it's not always possible to know through which editions readers encountered Austen, the information provided is certainly useful; more description and analysis of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editions of Austen's novels would be welcome, however, and would strengthen our understanding of the ways their "material qualities" might shape a reader's approach. Twelve readers—female and male, British and American—are considered at length (and more *passim*) as well as the Macaulay and Darwin families and the XII Club (a Quaker book club founded in Reading, Berkshire, in 1895). Halsey divides her historical readers into four chapters according to the nature of their engagement with Jane Austen: "Affection and Appropriation," "Opposition and Resistance," "Friendship and

Criticism," and "Sociability and Devotion."

Particularly illuminating is Halsey's analysis of those women writers who engage with the "Jane Austen" created through Henry Austen's "Biographical Notice" or, later, James Edward Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*. Halsey is adept at untangling the complexities of these relationships. While Mary Russell Mitford, for example, was an affectionate and intensive reader of the novels, even on occasion appropriating Austen's prose style, she also admired Henry's conventional literary lady. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a resistant reader, was equally swayed by Henry's formulation, which was uncongenial to her notions of the female artist as unconventional and driven to express the poetry of life: she objected that Austen's "ladyhood is stronger in her than her humanity." And yet these two writers, Mitford and Barrett Browning, tussled in friendship over their competing responses to Austen. More disparate responses were generated by the creaking door that, according to the *Memoir*, warned Jane Austen to conceal her writing: Anne Thackeray Ritchie read the story as a rebuke to her own discontent; Harriet Martineau read it with outrage at what convention demanded; Margaret Oliphant compared her own situation but also expressed skepticism at the *Memoir*'s "pleasant" image.

In 1831, after a dinner party, Thomas Babington Macaulay reported Sir James Mackintosh's "test of a true Austenian": "Everybody likes *Mansfield Park*. But only the true believers—the select—appreciate *Emma*." The cult of Jane Austen has a long history: Halsey shows how wonderfully variable its membership has been.

*Susan Allen Ford is Editor of Persuasions and Persuasions On-Line.*

