

## Worthy Rediscoveries and Eye-Opening Connections

### The Making of Jane Austen

By Devoney Looser.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. x + 291 pages.

23 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$29.95.

Review by Juliette Wells.

A significant commemorative year for a major author typically brings plenty of new books, and 2017 has certainly done just that for Jane Austen. One of the most eagerly awaited and widely publicized is by Devoney Looser, a highly respected scholar who was one of the plenary speakers at JASNA's 2017 AGM. (Looser will be known to many, too, as a delightful, real-life character in Deborah Yaffe's 2013 book *Among the Janeites*.) In *The Making of Jane Austen*, Looser spiritedly takes up the challenge of bringing substantial, wide-ranging new research on Austen reception history to a readership that includes, but is not limited to, fellow academics.

Looser concentrates on what she calls the "middle period" of Austen reception, which she defines as spanning from 1833 to 1975. She structures her book around four categories of evidence that, she asserts, have been overlooked or ignored by prior historical studies of Austen's influence: illustrations of, dramatizations of, politicized discourse about, and schoolroom adaptations of Austen's novels. These valuable materials, she contends, expand the scholarly conversation about Austen's influence beyond the well-worn opinions of what she calls "great men," and compel a reappraisal of received wisdom regarding the significant players and epochs in Austen's rise to international fame.

The great strength of Looser's presentation is, without doubt, the extraordinary array of largely forgotten textual and visual sources she has uncovered. She opts not to discuss her research methods, a decision that makes sense given the crossover audience she is addressing. Clearly, however, she has patiently scoured digital repositories,

traditional archives, and auction sites. In her commitment to restoring to view forgotten historical and contextual documents, she joins a growing group of resourceful, indefatigable researchers in Austen studies, including Janine Barchas, Margaret Doody, and Jocelyn Harris.

Several of Looser's visual finds appear as striking black-and-white illustrations in the book; many more, in color, are included on the book's companion website, to which a note on the copyright page (unfortunately easy to miss) directs interested readers. Highlights include a photograph of a Jane Austen banner carried by British suffragists in 1908 and the cover of a privately circulated men's-club pamphlet on Austen from 1902. Helpful too, given the large cast of historical characters Looser painstakingly introduces, are photographs of dramatists, actors, and adaptors of Austen, many of whose contributions she has rediscovered.

Looser's finest chapters, among them her treatment of suffragists and Austen, vividly recreate historical episodes that were remarked upon in their day, but whose influence did not extend to subsequent generations. Her consideration of suffragist marches, plays, and reenactments that featured Austen, along with other women designated important, has the additional benefit of showing the company in which Austen was placed at the time. Such comparative context is present to a varying degree in other chapters.

Equally fascinating, in Looser's retelling, is the performance history of the 1919 play *Dear Jane*, the first biographical dramatization of Austen. Surviving only in typescript, this play nevertheless deserves recognition both for its portrayal of Austen and, as Looser convincingly establishes, for the complicated layers of sexuality invoked by the actresses who portrayed Jane and Cassandra in a 1932 production: Josephine Hutchinson and Eva La Gallienne, whom audiences would have known to be each other's lovers.

Other chapters, while perhaps less gripping as stories, are nevertheless packed with worthy rediscoveries and eye-opening connections.

Even among those steeped in Austen, few will know about the first Austen "dissertation"—which was actually, as Looser explains, a "long essay"—and its author's connection to spiritualism, or about how Austen was excerpted in elocution guides and school textbooks. Fans and book collectors alike will learn from Looser's admirably thorough, multi-chapter treatment of nineteenth-century illustrated editions of Austen. (I must, however, correct one misstatement: the first American publication of Austen was the 1816 Philadelphia *Emma*, not the 1832–33 Carey & Lea editions).

Looser deserves special praise for her energetic efforts to reach readers beyond those already knowledgeable about all things Jane. Her strategies include calculated repetition, which helps orient readers who are dipping into the book; endnotes that she rightly describes as "copious," where her full acknowledgments of prior scholarship are to be found; and unapologetic colloquialisms, which will appeal to her many and varied Twitter followers.

A groundbreaking effort to broaden the conversation about Austen's influence in terms of both content and audience, *The Making of Jane Austen* represents a major contribution to the fast-growing area of Austen reception studies and will be remembered as a book of the decade in Austen scholarship more generally.

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