

IN 1925, VIRGINIA WOOLF, the doyenne of Modernism, published not only the completely modern *Mrs. Dalloway* but also *The Common Reader*, a collection of elliptical essays on topics ranging from her perception of her audience to the form of the essay and the “new” novel. In one of the essays in this book, Virginia Woolf boldly reminds the disillusioned post-war public why they should continue to read the works of Jane Austen: “Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unflinching good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature” (141). There is no equivocation in Virginia Woolf’s assessment. She names her essay “Jane Austen,” and this chapter title unblushingly canonizes the author.

If by so naming her essay “Jane Austen” Virginia Woolf asserts the stature of her subject and her place in literary history, then perhaps Jane Austen herself signifies the primacy of *Emma*’s position relative not only to the other characters in Highbury but also to the writer’s other novels. *Emma* is Jane Austen’s only eponymous major work, and Emma herself stands at the pinnacle (the peak, if you will) of her society. Emma has her own strong opinions about herself and others, and, as Claire Tomalin says, “everyone has an opinion of *Emma*.” Emma does have an unerring heart, but Janeites love her because she is so flawed; it is a fact that her deviations from kindness and sincerity do provide some of the most delightful moments in literature.

Virginia Woolf bemoans the fact that Cassandra Austen burnt “every letter that could gratify . . . curiosity, and spared only what she judged too trivial to be of interest” (134). Yet, the evidence from the remaining letters and from the novels suggests that Jane Austen “had few illusions about other people and none about herself” (136). Her characters’ human values still resonate at the end of the twentieth century, and so it is to her books that we keep returning. But what *do* readers look for in books—or in journals, for that matter? What is it we seek? In *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf describes how she is involved not only in the “art of writing” but also in the “pursuit of reading”—a telling choice of phrasing, I think, for this “pursuit” seems

to be an expression that would appeal in particular to readers of this journal. For Janeites, the pursuit of reading Jane Austen's novels and letters is more than a vocation or hobby. Reading is our great pleasure. And pleasure includes pursuit: the pursuit of reading becomes a chasing after meaning; it is an act of striving to understand the works in the context of Jane Austen's world view.

We hope that the conference papers included in this issue of *Persuasions*, in *Persuasions On-Line* (www.jasna.org), and in *Occasional Papers: Emma on Film* (www.jasna.org) will persuade both imaginists and realists that *Emma* presents problems of interpretation that are not so easily resolved—even after, or perhaps especially after, a conference devoted entirely to the novel. Everything about this book—the gigs, strawberries, charades, pianos, shrubbery—proves more complex than at first glance. Even the dedication is slippery and satirical: was “THE AUTHOR” ever “HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S DUTIFUL AND OBEDIENT HUMBLE SERVANT”?

The essays in the “Landscape Views” and “Miscellany” sections of *Persuasions* are not specifically focused on *Emma* but have been selected to provide readers with glimpses into the larger Regency world. If, as Virginia Woolf notes, “[t]he girl of fifteen is laughing, in her corner, at the world,” we need to know as much about that world as we can so that we can interpret the context, and so that we can laugh, too.

Is it so amazing that Virginia Woolf, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, underscores over and over her appreciation of Jane Austen's characters and values? Reminding us that in her own time Jane Austen was variously described as “a wit, a delineator of character,” “a poker of whom everybody is afraid,” and “the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly” (134), Virginia Woolf defies the conventions of her own day and pronounces Jane Austen “the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal” (145). Jane Austen—“the modest maiden lady who wrote furtively and quietly” (238)—still gives enormous pleasure at the end of the twentieth century because she so acutely observed humanity's foibles, so rigorously judged individual conduct, and so wittily delineated character.

Like Mr. Bennet, Jane Austen saw that “[t]here is something eternally laughable in human nature, some quality in men and women

that forever excites our satire" (136). We pursue our reading in order to apprehend that elusive quality. We seek it here, we seek it there, but we always return to Pemberley, Hartfield, Highbury, Donwell Abbey, Mansfield Park, and Chawton. Jane Austen is, of course, the author who is always at her peak.

WORKS CITED

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