

**Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (eds), *A Companion to Jane Austen* (Blackwell, 2009)**

The key for me lies on page 315. There Roger E. Moore, in a discussion on Austen's religion, avers 'Austen's novels diverge from evangelicalism by giving virtually no rein to Calvinism.' If you read Calvinism as a metonym for any and all militant monisms, then you can immediately see why Austen's world is such a welcoming place for readers over the generations. She is a deeply comic writer, with plenty of the satirical, sometimes cruel, edge that comes with that territory, but when it comes to the division of sheep and goats none is sent finally to the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth. To take tea regularly at Lady Catherine De Bourgh's looks like poetic justice for Mr Collins to most readers, but he likes it well enough, and it has its compensations even for his wise and pragmatic wife. Folly is a condition of a sociable life, not the tariff for eternal damnation. In Austen's satisfying and contained world, we can be both wise and foolish, and the consequences remain tolerable.

The agonistic reader will be wondering which path the rest of this review will go down. Will it attack her and her followers as insufficiently radical in the face of a naughty world, or will it condescend to her as a good woman within conservative patriarchy? I hope to avoid both these paths, though the risk of falling into the latter is greater. What Johnson and Tuite's collection seems to me to map so well is the logic of why Austen is so satisfying an author to so many people. Her *oeuvre* is big enough to be rich and small enough to be fully known by a common reader, and that is the reader the contributors to this volume align themselves with. Moreover, who reads Austen to be surprised? She is almost the antithesis of radical in her cultural politics and aesthetics: tolerant and liberal enough, even cautiously progressive in places, but far more inclined to undermine than to overturn things. Through irony she is challenging enough to keep readers mindfully entertained and ethically informed, but those who meet this challenge get a deep familiarity and sociability for their efforts. If the world is a uniformly revolting or unjust place, and humans the most deluded creatures in it, then this would be false consciousness, and Charlotte Brontë merely one of the first to spot Austen's untruth to life. But if life can be meaningful without being extreme, then Austen can satisfy while being a kind of realist. To read Austen with pleasure is to assent to certain assumptions about the world that are unlikely to sponsor revolution. It is to distance oneself a little from the rawer and less reflective emotions.

Austen seems always to have been reflective. She started literary life with parody rather than with disguised autobiography, one of the big differences between novelists, and the one that predicts most reliably whether they will be comedians or melodramatists on the human condition. Johnson and Tuite's collection provides a very satisfactory map for the reader who has been told that Austen is a parodist, but is not well enough acquainted with the contexts, in eighteenth-century novels and elsewhere, to perceive parody actively in the texts. Indeed, if you were being sent to a desert island with the collected works of Austen and had to choose one reference work, this *Companion* would serve you well. There are chapters on Austen's life and times; enough textual history; readings of each novel one could happily recommend to

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undergraduates; essays on genre and other formal issues; accounts of relevant historical material; and a brief resumé of Austen's dissemination in literary and popular culture since her death. Fortunately, this volume treats Austen as novelist rather than as a script-writer for costume dramas, and all forty-four contributors seem to be on their best behaviour as practitioners of English prose. None of the contributions is poorly or jargonistically written, and a couple – Doody on figures of speech and Perry on family matters would be my picks – are particularly good. Nearly all the essays have the air of coming out of long and loving acquaintance with the novels as personal touchstones. The writers know their Austen and know why what they have to say about it matters.

It would be good to think that the quality and the range of contributions might reflect the state of academic literary criticism in the moment after the theory and cultural studies booms. If it really does this, then the picture is quite a cheering one. The business of reading the books is central to each chapter, and each critic is intent on helping her readers understand Austen and their pleasure in her work more deeply and critically. This emphasis on the skills and pleasures of reading does not mark a return to the spiritual exercises of the Leavisite tradition, but it seems to have digested the challenges posed by theory, new historicism, and other politicised modes of textual engagement to return literary reading to itself, as the primary task of engagement with canonical texts. There are moments of intellectual vanity – it's a big book, after all – but the approaches essayed here do not 'interrogate' Austen's work. Rather, they answer to the texts and the complexities (formal, cultural, historical, political) implicated in reading them. This does not require that the gathered critics assent supinely to the tolerantly Tory cultural politics that underpins the novels, but they do not allegorise it away or sanctimoniously condemn it either. The huge cultural phenomenon this *Companion* addresses is the sustaining interest millions of readers, lay and academic, female and male, find in Austen. It offers rich pickings for those who share that interest and, like a good companion, it is neither uncritical nor over-critical. Even at the silly price the publisher wants to charge for it, this book would be a worthy addition to any university, school and even private library in a place where Austen is read and re-read.

**Robert Phiddian**