

**Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (Text Publishing, 2009)**

Claire Harman, biographer of Fanny Burney and Robert Louis Stevenson, has taken a different approach to Jane Austen. Though the first two chapters of *Jane's Fame* deal with Austen's life, the rest of the book charts her posthumous career, through the relative obscurity of the early Victorian period to the Darcy-mania and bonnet-fests of today. Harman reads Austen's letters with an eye to what they reveal about her attitudes to her work, and shows how the early biographical material misrepresented her, with its portrayal of a mousy aunt squirreling her work away in the corner of the drawing room: 'The truth is,' she says, 'that Jane Austen never exhibited self-consciousness or shame about her writing, and never needed to. ... Her ease and pleasure in writing as an occupation is evident from the very beginning, as is the full encouragement of her family' (10). She puts Austen in the context of the many other authors in her family and circle of acquaintances: the eldest brother, James, is more likely to have been regarded as 'the author of the family'; and, with her particular knowledge of Fanny Burney, Harman recounts the literary friendship between Burney and her neighbour Cassandra Cooke, Austen's mother's cousin.

When some of the family came to gather material for James Edward Austen-Leigh's biography in 1869, little was found. Harman exonerates Cassandra (Austen) from blame for failing to keep *all* Jane's letters, showing that, actually, keeping any at all was unusual. She points out that none of Austen's letters to her brothers James, Edward or Henry, or to Martha Lloyd, her friend and later sister-in-law, were kept, and only a few to Frank and Charles, the sailor brothers. Harman regrets 'how quick Austen's family had been to throw away her letters. ... It shows Cassandra's hoarding of around ninety to herself as the act of pious commemoration it is, rather than the act of vandalism it is sometimes represented to be' (133-4). These letters, held by Austen's niece Fanny Knatchbull, for various reasons weren't made available for the *Memoir*.

Austen-Leigh's book about his long-dead aunt poses some difficulties for modern readers. The usually coolheaded Harman exclaims with an incredulous 'Phew!' after quoting him on Austen's needlework: 'the same hand which painted so exquisitely with the pen could work as delicately with the needle' (140). As a twenty-first century woman, she can be forgiven for failing to suppress this small protest, though as a cultural historian, she can appreciate Austen-Leigh's aims and attitudes. 'His book was undertaken for defensive reasons: it sought to answer "vexatious" questions about Austen that had already arisen in public debate and nip any further questions in the bud' (144). However, the *Memoir* had the opposite effect: it sparked off the first wave of Austen-mania, which was further encouraged when her letters to Cassandra were published in 1884 by her great-nephew, Lord Brabourne. The Janeites were on the march.

One constant source of irritation to those who would like Austen to be seen as a great writer like any other is the disproportionate emphasis placed by some Austen fans

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on Regency paraphernalia, as if those last few years of her life, during which all her novels happened to be published but were neither all written or set, epitomised her whole life: “‘Jane Austen’s Regency World” [a magazine published by the Jane Austen Museum in Bath] could as well have an equals sign instead of an apostrophe. She stopped the clock and now IS her time’ (275), as Harman says. She points out how this tendency, which may have begun with Lord David Cecil, was encouraged by R.W. Chapman’s Clarendon Press edition of the complete works:

Even in the presentation of Austen’s texts by Chapman, the way was paved to full-scale ‘consumption’ of Austen as a multi-faceted literary-historical product. The illustrations to *The Novels of Jane Austen* – of carriages, dress, dancing steps – introduced quantities of extra information that was generic rather than specific to Austen. Chapman’s editions removed Austen from her own particular life-story and attached her to the age she lived in. ... No one rushed to copy Chapman’s method for other authors because it wasn’t appropriate. There were no appendices about donkeys or illustrations of orphanages or convict-ships in editions of Dickens. Austen was being treated like a cultural package; educational, in unchallenging ways, and reliably, cleanly, entertaining. (197)

Harman mounts a subtle and convincing argument that Austen very carefully avoided the datedness which this kind of approach forces upon her: ‘Although Austen’s novels were composed between 1792 and 1817, all six seem to take place in an imaginary 1801 or 2, regardless of internal evidence to the contrary’ (275). This is part of her appeal, but perhaps her avoidance of ‘period-specific detail’ also accounts for the urge readers have to fill in those details of costume and interior décor which she has carefully omitted, an urge which has been both pandered to and heightened by the bewildering array of screen versions of recent years.

Harman treats these films with considerable asperity: ‘The wild success of recent Austen films relies in great part on their visual realisation of the erotic potential of the novels, on the dramatisation of scandalous elements locked into some of Austen’s backstories and on the vision, generously lingered over by the camera, of a lot of handsome men in the flattering dress of the early 1800s’ (251). The biopic *Becoming Jane* is described as ‘a somewhat deranged mixture of actual facts about Austen’s life, complete fictions about Austen’s life, and references to Austen’s novels, letters and juvenilia’ (261).

*Jane’s Fame* is a gripping book. Harman writes with passion as well as scholarly rigour. Her dismay at the commodification of Austen, the distance the world has carried her from the core of those six precious novels, is palpable, but, she says, ‘perhaps she simply succeeded too well at charming us: she knew what she liked in a novel, she laboured to make her own novels as attractive as possible and – it worked. Better than anyone could have imagined possible, or desirable’ (279). It is easy to become infected

with her righteous indignation, though D.W. Harding's warning seeps in like a draft from an open sash behind the window-curtains: is Harman's book, like Jane Austen's novels, destined to be 'read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked'? (228). Is there not an exception each one of us would like to make to her blanket disapproval of the films, or an 'Austen-themed reading' or 'musical event' which we might have enjoyed or even (perish the thought) organised? Harman does not quite come down on the side of the academy: she is scathing about some work done by academic critics. But, she concludes, 'it is impossible to imagine a time when she or her works could have delighted us long enough.' In a way, the whole Austen industry, both commercial and critical, is propelled by an impulse of homage to delight, a kind of one-way outpouring of affection on an object which cannot reciprocate. Almost like a religion. And Harman, in *Jane's Fame*, proves herself a discriminating but none the less fervent acolyte.

**Gillian Dooley**