

4-1-2004

# Historicizing Austen

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CLIO 33:3 2004

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**The Historical Austen.** By William H. Galperin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. viii + 286 pages.

**Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon.** By Clara Tuite. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xii + 242 pages.

Perhaps it is only a coincidence brought about by the fact that I was reading both of these books at the same time I was examining a number of books about the life of Jesus, but a strange sense of *déjà vu* began to occur to me. Has anyone else noticed that both Jesus and Jane are written about in ways that are strikingly similar? For instance, what exactly did each of them believe? Were Jesus and Jane liberal or were they conservative? What about their sexualities? And why did not either of them marry? Or did Jesus? Or did Jane love her sister or her niece? What are we to make of the zealotry of their respective followers with their own particular social and political agendas? Without being facetious, is it not fair to conclude that both Jesus and Jane are knotty biographical and historical subjects surrounded by coterie that have obscured or obfuscated their deity's lives for a number of self-serving purposes? And although one would think that Austen would be much easier to position historically, such would not appear to be the case. Reading William H. Galperin's *Austen* alongside Clara Tuite's *Austen* reveals just how differently the historical subject of "Austen" can be

constructed and deployed in the hands of critics, each with a different critical method or allegiance. But both studies also raise provocative questions for the literary critic interested in interrogating how effective it is to use historical apparatuses in order to interpret fictional works. Although both authors use some of the same documentary texts and discuss some of the same fictional and historical characters, they reach much different conclusions about who Austen was and what her *oeuvre* means. In short, reading these two works together forced me to wonder if we can ever know a historically accurate Austen, or have we reached the same point in Austen studies that we have with historical studies of Jesus?

To begin: there is no question that Galperin's *The Historical Austen* is an important, intelligent, engaged and engaging study of Austen's works and literary ideologies. For my tastes, it might be the best study of Austen published during the past 20 years. Relying on the theoretical work of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), *Heterologies* (1986), and *The Writing of History* (1988), Galperin queries the moves that Austen herself makes as a historian of the everyday realities of her world. In his *Heterologies*, De Certeau claims that "over time, and in the density of its time, each episteme is made up of the heterogeneous" (qtd. in Galperin, 7). For Austen this means that her novels must be read as heterogeneous documents, what Galperin calls "a composite of histories, from the social to the aesthetic to the conceptual to the geopolitical" (7). De Certeau, like Mikhail Bakhtin, Philippe Ariès, Michel Foucault, or more recently Daniel Roche among other European intellectual historians, seeks to identify the "oppositional practices" of weak or disenfranchised subjects that allow them to "elude discipline," all the while remaining within the boundaries of that disciplinary system (that is, the factory system). For Galperin, versions of this oppositional practice can be found throughout Austen's novels, thereby allowing him to conclude: "there is in the practice of every generation a resistance to intelligibility that, as Austen discloses somewhat wistfully, is the mark and measure of resistance per se" (31). More specifically throughout the book, though, he refers back to De Certeau, at one point arguing, "*Emma* represents the oppositional practices of everyday life oppositionally" (70).

Clearly committed to situating Austen's "historicity" (1), Galperin accomplishes his goal by interrogating these much-trafficked, canonical works in new and intriguing ways as he states that his task is to uncover "what Austen meant when she wrote it and not what she may have unknowingly accomplished" (18). Each novel is positioned in relation to that small, overlooked facet of everyday life, that detail that by magnifying can provide a new lens by which to interrogate the subtle, shifting "historicity" of the texts.

If I were to characterize Galperin's interpretive style, I would have to say that it reminded me of Emily Dickinson's injunction to "read it slant." He brings a knowing, bemused, but suspicious eye to that smarmy bachelor Colonel Brandon (more on this anon), or to the overlooked but highly suspect relationship between Miss Bates and Knightley, as well as to the Austen narrator herself, who becomes in Galperin's hands a befuddled dupe of the inanities operating all around her. As for Austen the novelist, Galperin has constructed a sort of "dark ladie" of the probable fictional, not the skilled practitioner of the realistic novel tradition that Ian Watt, F.R. Leavis and others have claimed for her. For Galperin, Austen is "a historian of a dense and inscrutable present rather than an unwitting prophet of a dismal future" (23). By reading her work as a mix of toxic nostalgia and what might almost be a precursor of magical realism, Galperin presents Austen's fictions as straddling both the earlier as well as the emerging epistemic and literary traditions.

Galperin has divided his book into two sections, part 1, "Historicizing Austen," with chapters on the trial of Austen's aunt, Jane Leigh Perrot, followed by a chapter on theories of the picturesque. The third chapter in this section examines Austen's style and ideologies in relation to the major novels of Fanny Burney. These three introductory chapters might each be read as a false start to a book that could have gone in three different directions: either the biographical, the aesthetic, or the purely feminist, literary historical. The talent of this book, though, is that the methodologies of these three chapters are later interwoven into the second part of the book, each of whose chapters glance in all three directions while also accomplishing serious historical inquiry into the composition, reception, and meaning of the novels. The second part of the book, "Reading the Historical Austen," considers *Lady Susan*, *Sanditon*, as well as the six

major works, largely in relation to the details, rather than the narrative of the novels (6).

"History, Silence, and 'The Trial of Jane Leigh Perrot,'" chapter 1, develops in detail the strange case of Aunt Perrot's trial for shoplifting a piece of lace that she could easily have afforded. The theft itself could be seen as an "oppositional practice," a silent protest against the burdens of gender and entitlement that Aunt Perrot could presumably have suffered from all her life (she appears to have been a kleptomaniac in the style described by Louise Kaplan in her *Female Perversions*). But Galperin does not focus on this more obvious reading, instead choosing to try to understand why Austen never wrote or spoke about the trial in any context. Galperin instead reads Austen's complete silence on this episode as an instance of her own oppositional practice: "Such an act or tact on Austen's part constitutes a very real resistance because it counts chiefly on the intractability of the real—the 'trial' of Jane Leigh Perrot before *and after* the fact—to changes and improvements of the more customary and narratable kind. This resistance, which is also an invitation to a special kind of reflection on the part of the reader, is in many ways the central work of Austen's major and still silent writings" (emphasis in original, 43).

Chapter 2, "The Picturesque, the Real, and the Consumption of Jane Austen," situates Austen in relation to the theories of the aesthetic and picturesque proposed by William Gilpin and later developed by Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price (45). Galperin develops numerous interesting correspondences between the representation of picturesque landscapes and realistic narratives, at one point noting that Austen's "particular realism, far from domesticating or containing otherness, actually celebrated its uncanny prevalence in everyday life" (53). At another point he notes that Knight's notion of "poetic probability" in landscapes quickly becomes "an argument for naturalization," which in turn "obscures things, or at least how one looks at them, in the service of specific class and hegemonic interests" (54).

Chapter 3, "Why Jane Austen Is Not Frances Burney: Probability, Possibility, and Romantic Counterhegemony," places Austen against or alongside Burney in order to chart the move that Austen made in *Northanger Abbey* to exorcise

the gothic from the female literary canon, and place in its stead the sort of probabilistic fictions that she and Burney wrote. After a fairly lengthy analysis of Burney's *Evelina*, Galperin distinguishes Austen from Burney by noting, "Austen contravenes the discourse of the probable and its rational and empirical bases in three distinct ways. She allows readers to draw *improbable* inferences from probable signs; she allows in more romantic fashion for the irruption of 'novelty' amid the probable or the 'everyday'; and finally, Austen allows that a 'probable,' comparatively safe world is insufficiently secure at present to be always worth preserving" (emphasis in original, 95).

Part 2 of Galperin's study includes chapters on all of Austen's works by situating the texts within the categories that Galperin has defined: the probable, the realistic, the real, the disciplinary and regularity, the subversive and strategic. It is impossible to detail every nuance of his interpretations, but his originality certainly lies in his abilities to force us to see characters we thought we knew in very different, more complex lights. For instance, he convincingly presents a more manipulative, scheming Colonel Brandon whose "machinations of authority are sufficiently recoverable and self-serving to inculcate him as a troublemaker who, more than Willoughby himself, recalls the meddling Clement Willoughby of Burney's *Evelina*" (119). Manipulating Elinor and holding Edward hostage while he positions himself as Marianne's last and best option, Brandon is not only wily and devious, he is the representative of "Austen's marriage to a literary form and to an authority—or an hegemony again—that forecloses on change in seeming to value it" (120).

Another equally provocative interpretation that Galperin makes in these chapters concerns the relationship between Miss Bates and Knightley in *Emma*, a relationship that goes a long way to explaining the Box Hill incident which serves as the moralistic climax to that novel. A sort of nostalgic figure of infinite retreat, Miss Bates stands in relation to Knightley as a predictable figure making no demands, and, in fact, protecting him and the proprietary claims of the patriarchy, which are repeated with variations in the other secret relationships in the novel: "one such complication—and another way of getting at the simultaneously expansive and receding horizons on which *Emma* as a whole re-

flects—is the invitation to speculate on a matter that, much like the world *according* to Miss Bates, is recoverable without the narrator's attention or understanding. I am speaking again of the attachment of Miss Bates to Mr. Knightley, which refers to events and contingencies in the prehistory of the narrative that no commentator has really noticed or explored" (emphasis in original, 193). By attending closely to the nuances of the text, Galperin uncovers a hidden prehistory that presents an Austen, not simply nostalgic for an earlier agrarian England, but committed to shoring up the claims of the nuclear family as a paternalistic protectorate (199).

Galperin's study, as I noted above, is a deeply researched book that places Austen as well as her novels within a view that we have seen many times before, and yet with this book, we see it differently, slightly to a slant. Mercifully, he does not dwell on some of the more far-fetched lesbian readings of Austen, although he does mention the strange erotic tension that would appear to exist between Isabella and Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* (144-45). By avoiding one faddish preoccupation, however, he may have succumbed to another: namely, a sophisticated version of reader-response theory and its use of some of the convoluted prose associated with tracing the horizon of reading or the probable and the possible (Barthes's *l'effet de réel* and the irresistible *vraisemblance*, [Galperin, 4]). But this is an ambitious book that does not attempt simply to present literary history. In its use of many methodologies, all of which will probably not appeal to every reader, Galperin has crafted a significant study of Austen's works and their milieux.

Tuite's *Romantic Austen* is a very different book that examines virtually the same territory, but with a stated focus on the categories of "romantic," "sexual politics," and "literary canon." As such, it is a book that forces us to ask, what is so romantic about Austen? But further it compels us to ask, what is romanticism? Unfortunately, these very large and extremely complex questions cannot be adequately answered in a book that focuses so narrowly on one author. And even more unfortunately, one sees the persistent outlines of Tuite's dissertation—on Austen's use of quotations from Cowper—all too clearly throughout the book. In attempting to move beyond such a narrow focus, Tuite has

produced a book riddled with prose that gives new meaning to the accusation of repetitious.

Tuite's introduction, "The 'fall into a quotation': Tracking the Canonical, Romantic and Post-Romantic Austen," lays out her general claims: "This book seeks to contextualize Austen in the light of these reconfigurations of Romanticism ['an interdisciplinary field reconfigured by new theories and methodologies'] by engaging the Austen novel as a specifically Romantic form of cultural production" (1). Vague, yes, but Tuite goes on to assert that her study will "elaborate a genealogy of genre, national culture and canon-formation which considers the ways in which Austen's fictions participate in the production of a specifically Romantic form of British national culture to anticipate the terms of their own canonization" (2). Such a thesis, however, has the unfortunate tendency to become circular, looping back on itself as in: Austen's works become the definition of British and romantic because they make claims that we now recognize as British and romantic.

After a useful review of Austen's place in the literary canon as delineated by the Augustan, realist, feminist, or Marxian critics, Tuite makes her own claims for Austen's romantic identities: "Austen is one of the first practitioners of Romantic organicism" (11), which can be seen in what Tuite calls the "heritage-culture canonical production of Austen within the broad British cultural legacy of Romantic-period organicism itself" (13). The "green" Austen of the idyllic British countryside and country estate works to "revive a beleaguered landed aristocratic culture," which in turn "regenerates the aristocracy by fashioning the culture of the ruling classes as national culture" (13). Tuite describes her second attempt to romanticize Austen as "Queering Austen," or presenting the heterosexual marriage plots that conclude the Austen canon as "un-natural or unfamiliar" (17). But unnatural and unfamiliar to whom? Clearly, Tuite's ideological agenda is to claim Austen for a lesbian female literary canon that one would be hard pressed to recognize, although Tuite herself admits this resistance and uses it to frame her methodology: "my study will demonstrate how a queer Austen is a crucial category in the interrogation of Austen as a signifier of British national culture. My aim is to make visible the heterosexist invest-



ment in these [novels] as natural, and to make the artificiality of these fictions visible" (19).

Chapter 1 of Tuite's study examines the juvenilia, specifically *Catharine, or The Bower* (ca. 1792) as an antisentimental parody: "I wish to argue in what follows that the sentimental parody of *Catherine* involves a panic-stricken, apotropaic representation of the threat of female homoeroticism represented by the contemporary discourses and conventions of sentiment" (33). Such a statement reveals both the strengths and the weaknesses of this book. The initial premise is interesting and worth pursuing, but then the prose has a tendency to become prolix and repetitious, the vocabulary verbose, and the claims simply fantastical at times. The bower becomes for Tuite "a site of intense female homosocial sentimental attachment, [which] licenses a kind of benign proto-lesbianism" (38). Am I the only person who does not know (or want to know) what "benign proto-lesbianism" is?

This chapter also introduces what I would label the slippery "masturbatory" problem in Tuite's study. "Masturbation" or "masturbatory" become "key words" (in Williams's sense) throughout this text, and are used in almost any or all contexts. Sometimes just reading a book is a "masturbatory" act (73). Other times sitting in bed and writing a letter are "masturbatory" acts (80). Yet at other times the novel itself is masturbating: "the threat that sentimental novels present to stable narratives of development and socialization most emphatically figures in antinovel discourse as a form of masturbation" (81). All of this recourse to the term is perhaps initially in token esteem of Eve Sedgwick's essay on Austen ("Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl"), which Tuite at one point refers to as a "legendary reading of Austen in the bedroom" (88). But finally all of this use of the term in overwrought or implausible contexts as somehow revealing a "protolesbian" tendency in Austen is annoying and silly.

Chapter 2 explores Austen's development of free indirect discourse, which Tuite labels a "technology of discretion" (57) and a means to "represent female interiority" (62). Interestingly, Tuite also focuses a considerable amount of attention on Colonel Brandon, arguing that his presence in *Sense and Sensibility* accounts for the novel's "abjected status in the Austen canon, ambivalently acknowledging its

own generic forebears in the novel of sensibility" (67). In a useful discussion of the novel in relation to David Hume and other theorists of sensibility, Tuite presents one of her best readings in the book. Clearly focused on how Austen revised *Sense and Sensibility*, Tuite argues that it was through the use of free indirect discourse that this novel effectively replaced the epistolary and sentimental genres in the canon.

Chapter 3, "Breeding Heritage-Culture: *Mansfield Park*, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and the Glorious Revolutions of the Country House," usefully places Edmund Burke alongside Austen's novel in order to argue "that *Mansfield Park* functions as an initiatory national heritage fiction of history as 'entropic decline'" (101). This is another strong and interesting chapter, with many valuable insights and interpretations. Oddly, though, one keeps stumbling on the residue or contours of the earlier dissertation, and in this chapter we are suddenly presented with a reading of Cowper's poetry on oak trees (109; 120-22), just as Austen's tendency not to quote poetry in *Persuasion* is dropped into an earlier chapter (74).

Chapter 4, "Austen's Romantic Fragment: *Sanditon* and the Sexual Politics of Land Speculation," is one of the most extensive discussions of the last, unfinished novel, but, unfortunately, it is marred by yet again the lapse into what I would call the lesbian agenda. For Tuite, *Sanditon* is a reworking by Austen of her father's death in Bath in 1805, and much of the chapter, focused on property, financial speculation, and land ventures, is very interesting. But Tuite just could not resist going farther, pushing her reading of Lady Denham to the edges of the fantastical. For Tuite, the scheming Lady Denham is an example of "neo-Gothicism of elegant lesbian vampirism" (174), while the fragment is a "lesbian seaside romance: a fantasy of female primogeniture by the sea without any return to the estate as the rural core of green England" (182). Even these statements are simply preliminary to the ultimate claim: "Lady Denham figures the writing woman as non-reproductive woman. She is the non-reproductive, parvenue artistocratic woman as a figure for the female writer . . . . The possibility of Lady Denham as a kind of fantastical alter-ego of Austen, were she to have money instead of education, is suggested by a letter of Thursday 13 March 1817 (quoting Austen to her niece Fanny): 'Single women have a dreadful propensity for being

poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony, but I need not dwell on such arguments with you, pretty Dear, you do not want inclination” (190). Many hints dropped by Tuite have led to this revelatory moment in the text. Tuite would appear actually to be suggesting that Lady Denham should be read as a self-portrait of Austen in love with and pursuing her niece Fanny. And such a claim clearly positions Austen in a very different literary camp than she has ever inhabited before (the “benign proto-lesbian” female literary canon). For Tuite, “writing is the female primogeniture of productive non-reproduction” (190), so according to this logic women who write must be lesbians or protolesbians, giving birth to books rather than babies.

In conclusion, Galperin’s study is a strong, important work that I would predict will be read and cited for years to come. There is a good deal of strong and interesting material in Tuite’s study as well, but the attempt to “queer Austen” will, at least I hope, pass from the critical scene and seem itself in a few years to be a historical curiosity.

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