

Unpersuaded

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Jane Austen and the Enlightenment, by Peter Knox-Shaw, *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xi + 275pp.*

"SHE IS THE PARTISAN of virtue alone."¹ With those sonorous words Alasdair MacIntyre dismissed Marilyn Butler's attempt to identify Jane Austen with the Burkean conservatives of the French Revolutionary period in her now well-known study *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975). MacIntyre, no friend to Burke, perhaps reacted somewhat strenuously against Butler's case, but then Butler's case was overstated. MacIntyre was certainly right to suggest that Austen's conservatism must not be understood as mere party doctrine—hers was a cast of mind altogether deeper and more reflective than any political platform can be.

Just what her cast of mind has been hotly debated ever since the publication of Butler's study. Peter Knox-Shaw's volume is the latest in the line of works that refuse to see her as a "Tory reactionary." He would instead have her be an "Anglican Erasmian" whose thought was characterized by skepticism and openness. Her principal intellectual debts, he thinks, were to David Hume and Adam Smith, rather than to Dr. Johnson, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Bible. Far from

having been an anti-Jacobin, Jane Austen, on this reckoning, belonged to the Enlightenment. Now, Marilyn Butler may not have been right, but certainly Professor Knox-Shaw is far, far wrong.

Of *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment's* nine chapters, six are devoted to the finished novels and a seventh to the unfinished *Sanditon*. The remaining chapters are the stronger ones: a seventy-page introductory study of the intellectual influences on Austen's youth and upbringing and a briefer interlude on the Evangelical revival of the early-nineteenth century. In these two chapters Knox-Shaw functions as literary sleuth and intellectual historian. He does indeed find grist for his mill.

Jane's brothers, it turns out, were not immune to the influences of their age. Of microscopes and radical politics, nature poetry and provocative drama, James and George Austen each had his share. Edward Austen gave as a gift to his sister Thomas Percival's *Tales, Fables, and Reflections*, a book of marked Voltairian sentiments that Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* would later cite. Then there is the piety of Henry Austen, the author of the "Biographical Notice" appended to *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* at the time of their posthumous publication, who took such pains to portray his sister in a saintly light. It seems that Henry's Evangelical piety had so far unhinged him from the Tory, High-Church tradition that he had become willing to praise Oliver Cromwell. These facts, coupled with others sprinkled throughout the text—such as the Novelist's apparent approval of even questionable works of theater—are sufficiently numerous and varied as to force the conservative critic to admit that Miss Austen occasionally kept strange company. But since when have conservatives insisted on the most stringent purity of association? Burke himself, after all, was a Whig, yet Johnson seemed to tolerate him well enough. Joseph de Maistre was once a

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Freemason, yet Louis de Bonald—no man of the Lodge—was able to see in him a kindred spirit. Foibles and youthful influences will not suffice to prove that Jane Austen was on the side of Bentham and Condorcet, Gibbon and Voltaire.

Knox-Shaw's interpretations of the major novels are still less convincing than his biographical ruminations. We are asked to believe that *Emma* is a novel about the unhappiness of the absolute ruler—Emma before her moment of self-realization or conversion—while *Mansfield Park* is the story of “emancipation.” *Pride and Prejudice* also tells of “emancipation,” not of the fragile heroine from the tyrannical slave-holding ward, but of the haughty gentleman freed from misconceptions about rank and status by the attractions of a strong-willed woman. And in *Persuasion* we are to see a Louisa Musgrove who is not firm enough—“Austen shows how dangerously self-conscious Louisa is about Wentworth's regard, to the point of betraying a Tinkerbell-like dependence on him”—set in opposition to an Anne Elliot, whose “power as a character has everything to do with inner intransigence.” Enough. On this reading the novels of Jane Austen are but a succession of “strong-willed women,” “women of power.” Fanny Price tasting the independence of having her own money, Liza Bennett speaking frankly to Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Croft ready to walk “until her feet blister”: these are the privileged moments in the novels, the crucial indications of the author's convictions.

It is difficult to know where to begin answering such a reading. One is tempted to ask, Are not the books love stories after all? Do not these independent women find their completion and happiness in marriage? Ah, but in marriage they do not submit: “in *Emma* matrimony brings no lessening of power. Mrs. Churchill rules the roost at Enscombe, Mrs. Elton is ‘queen of the evening’ at the Crown and tries to boss all Highbury, and Emma after

the collapse of her fantasies of control enjoys a control that is all the more complete.” Knox-Shaw presses his point too far. His case rests on the reading-in to conversations and characters of attitudes foreign to them. It is true that Miss Austen painted on small canvasses with a fine brush. Posture and motion, intonation and allusion and even silence all have their shades of meaning in her works. Yet to claim, as he does, that “Austen is not the sort of novelist who speaks through her characters” seems merely a convenient interpretive tool for setting aside aspects of the works that do not suit his theories. The words and thoughts of Jane Austen's heroines are the stumbling blocks of Knox-Shaw's reading; indeed, they will not submit to his tutelage. He relies, and must rely, upon ironic readings of the texts.

What is so distressing about *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* is that if it were a true account, the stories would not be timeless classics shedding light on human nature, but mere tracts for their times, hopelessly irrelevant to our own more liberated age. It seems that this is precisely how Knox-Shaw would have them. He stresses that when the novels were first published they were greeted as the work of an “entirely new class of fiction” by Sir Walter Scott and Richard Whately in their 1818 and 1821 reviews. His misreading of Whately's review is particularly egregious. Pointing to Whately as having been the “editor of Francis Bacon,” he would have us believe that his review praised Austen primarily for her “alertness to diversity”—for her skill, that is, in observation and description, or, in other words, as an empiricist. Whately did praise her “minute fidelity of detail,” but he was at least equally concerned to approve of the moral instruction present in the works. It was as a student of Aristotle, not of Bacon, that Whately wrote when he praised the novels as a species of “fictitious biography” that “concentrate,

as it were, into small compass, the net result of wide experience.”²

What is so splendid about Jane Austen, on Whately’s view, is that she was so wise and so good a student of human nature. And she affirmed and transmitted the understanding of the good that she had gained. Fanny Price was not the headstrong modern girl that Sir Thomas Bertram in a moment of pique accused her of being—and that Knox-Shaw would celebrate her for: she was the model of constancy that Alasdair MacIntyre has described in *After Virtue*, firm in her rejection of Henry Crawford because her moral vision was clear. Nor was Anne Elliot a model of female independence of a “post-Enlightenment” mold, even more progressive than Mary Wollstonecraft. She was a Christian woman whose patience and hope came from her belief in Divine Providence and her recourse to prayer. Yes, as countless critics have noted, the moral teachings in Jane Austen’s novels are understated, and the explicit references to religion are few. Yet when we are told that Anne Elliot found her peace from “an interval of meditation, serious and grateful,” and that Edmund Bertram responded to Mary Crawford’s scoffing in the chapel at Sotherton with “I have not yet left Oxford long enough to forget what chapel prayers are,” we are inclined to believe that the authoress approves of her heroine and hero and that she breathes the same air that they do. A “partisan of virtue” Jane Austen certainly was, and of timeless, eternal virtues at that.

What she certainly was *not* was a child of the Enlightenment. The most inexplicable aspect of Knox-Shaw’s study is its attempt to link Jane Austen to David Hume and Adam Smith. Indeed, the volume’s index reveals some five dozen entries for Hume and some four dozen for Smith, compared to a mere seven references to Samuel Johnson, who is generally admitted to have been a formative influence upon Austen. Smith’s neo-Stoic theory of

moral sentiments and Hume’s calm rationalism are supposed to be similar to the Novelist’s outlook. Thus, when considering the three prayers that she left behind in manuscript, Knox-Shaw quotes one small phrase imploring God for the gifts of self-knowledge and charity, and then opines that Austen’s “allowance made for partiality towards the self...chimes in well with Hume’s caveats on the extreme difficulty of establishing an external view of the self, or with Smith’s notion of the ‘impartial spectator.’” Surely Ockham’s razor can be usefully invoked in a case such as this. How much more simple an hypothesis it is to see in her prayers the influence of the Book of Common Prayer she heard daily recited than philosophical writings that we can have no confidence she ever read.³

Yet to attempt to reduce Austen’s prayers to the effusions of a skeptical stoicism shaped by the Scottish Enlightenment not only does violence to Austen and to her prayers—with their explicit references to “our blessed saviour”—it also points to a peculiar interpretation of Hume and Smith. Knox-Shaw is keen to tell of these thinkers’ influence among Evangelicals and to stress the moderate character of the British Enlightenment generally. Both points are common enough, and worth making, but it will not do to press them, as he does, to the extent of attempting to overturn the “old and long-entrenched view that Christianity and the Enlightenment were as chalk and cheese, as far removed from each other as reason and *l’infâme*.” Sometimes old views are “long-entrenched” for good reasons. When David Hume lay a-dying, he joked with his friend Smith about the various excuses he might think up to convince Charon to leave him on our side of the Styx a little longer. He ended with this one, reported by Smith in his letter to William Strahan about Hume’s death: “Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes

of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall [sic] of some of the prevailing systems of superstition."⁴ This sounds rather more like Voltaire's *écrasez l'infâme* than Erasmian Anglicanism. It is hard to believe that Hume, for one, would be pleased with the novels of Jane Austen, or with her prayers.

What is still more perplexing about Knox-Shaw's attempt to link Austen to Hume and Smith is that he seems utterly blind to the deep gulf between the social visions of the two sages and the novelist. The disparity in their views of human happiness is all the more striking given that all three of them were unmarried. For Hume, as is revealed by his short autobiographical statement, "My Own Life," and for Smith, reflecting on Hume in his letter to Strahan, it is plain that the bachelor's life was agreeable and perhaps even preferable. Smith goes so far as to echo the apotheosis of Socrates at the end of Plato's *Phaedo* by concluding his letter with the confession that he had "always considered" Hume "as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit." For his own part, Hume tells of his passion for letters and his desire for financial independence and paints a picture of a life lived without regrets. How like the many other self-satisfied and self-ruling Enlightenment bachelors were these two Scottish loners; like Spinoza, Voltaire, and Kant, to name but a few, they never married, never knew the joys and sorrows of life as husbands and fathers.

Jane Austen did not marry, but she seems to have wished to, and therein may

lie the great difference of the Novelist from the *philosophes*. Her tales chronicle the rise and fall of families, those "little social commonwealths," as she calls them in *Persuasion*, that she portrays as nurseries of virtue and vice, good sense and folly. We only catch glimpses of her ideal of the well-functioning family, because all of her novels (with the exception of *Northanger Abbey*) deal with the failures of parents that must be made up for by the successful marriages of her protagonists. Yet in the great house at Uppercross, we are told, the Musgroves are "excellent parents" who make possible "blessings" and "happiness" for their children and who welcome guests with "all that is strongest and best in [their] cellars." They may lack the "advantage of taste and delicacy" that the more refined characters enjoy, but they do at least show us, through the eyes of Anne Elliot, a vision of bustling, warm, living humanity that Jane Austen knew and valued herself, as her letters amply attest. Was Jane Austen a detached, skeptical woman who held her religion at arm's length, preferred theater to church services, and wrote love stories in order to vindicate the rights of "strong-willed women"? Knox-Shaw leaves us unpersuaded.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Jane's Fighting Ships," *New Statesman* (October 24, 1975), 509. 2. Richard Whately, "Review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*," *Quarterly Review* XXIV (January 1821): 352-76, reprinted in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1968), 93. 3. For the texts of her prayers and helpful endnotes, see "Prayers," in Jane Austen, *Catherine and Other Writings*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford, 1993), 247-50. 4. The text of Smith's letter may be read in David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, Literary* (Indianapolis, 1987), xlix.