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Nora Bartlett, *Jane Austen: Reflections of A Reader*

Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou

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REFERENCES

Bartlett, Nora. *Jane Austen: Reflections of A Reader*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, ISBN 978-1-783-749-751

- 1 In the preface to *Jane Austen: Reflections of A Reader*, Jane Stabler emphasizes the exceptional and original nature of Nora Bartlett's book, which consists of a collection of insightful talks and essays on Jane Austen selected by the historian Robert Bartlett after his wife's death at the age of only sixty-seven. Throughout her distinguished career as a teacher of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century fiction at the Universities of Oxford and St Andrews, Nora Bartlett (1949-2016) was "a superlative reader of Jane Austen, whose novels she first enjoyed at the age of six and carried on reading and re-reading almost every year for the rest of her life" (vii). Bartlett's lifetime engagement with Austen's writing is thus reflected in these diversified papers and talks published just as she had delivered them to various audiences—The Jane Austen Society of Scotland, undergraduate literary societies, book clubs, academic symposiums, including her own students—over several decades, hence the prevailing lively tone and oral register.
- 2 What particularly mattered for Bartlett was the subtle connection between Austen's fiction and lived experience, and this pragmatic approach surfaces in many penetrating commentaries on family life, human foibles, the physical intensity of some scenes, or on the importance of scrutinizing one's and other people's behaviours. Her exploration of the novels' particular relationship with "the texture of reality" (vii) can also be seen in the choice of titles like "Mothers and Daughters in Jane Austen", "Food in Jane Austen's Fiction", "Emma and Harriet: Walking Companions", "Emma in the Snow", or "Jane Austen and Grandparents".
- 3 In the first chapter of the volume, entitled "Reading *Pride and Prejudice* over Fifty Years", Bartlett both examines the question of the readers' shifting identification with Austen's characters, especially as one's reading evolves at different stages of life, and whether the novel in fact presupposes, or addresses, a female reader. Challenging David Miller's argument that the novel's gendering of the reader as female may baffle a young male reader, Bartlett insists on the complexity of the narrative voice which leads us to pay attention to both what is said, and what remains unsaid. While the novels do work to make readers identify with the heroine, "the narrative as a whole is not participating fully with that process, but is offering us a comment on it, which is not even fully sympathetic with her viewpoint" (3). Her multiple re-readings of *Pride and Prejudice*, once as a girl, then as a woman, also enabled Bartlett to discern the subtle presence of "a speaker who is eerily untethered and ungendered, like an angel un-voiced, like a countertenor" (3). Bartlett, however, is sometimes so carried away by her enthusiastic will to connect the novels with real life that she tends to forget that Austen's characters are but literary constructions, as when she writes that "the people of Meryton [...] are probably used to Mrs. Bennett's silliness" (13), or that "Elizabeth, in attendance on Jane's sickbed, is probably accompanied by a thousand embarrassing recollections" (15).
- 4 The second chapter, entitled "*Sense and Sensibility*" considers both the wounding silences and secrets between the Dashwood sisters, and the dramatic secrecy imposed on Elinor by the sly Lucy Steele. As Bartlett contends, the novel's main subject is "really neither sense nor sensibility", but "the education and miseducation of the heart" (37). The third chapter discusses the recurring motif of the problematic mother-daughter relationships in *Sense and Sensibility*. If no Austen heroine ever becomes a mother in the course of the novels, thereby reflecting the fate of their creator, most of them are impoverished daughters in quest of a husband – a fact (too) openly acknowledged by

Mrs. Bennet who has brought her daughters up to be husband-hunters. Strikingly enough, Austen's mother figures either indulge or bully their children, and happen to be far less sensible and discerning than their daughters, thus failing in their duty to provide guidance for their offspring. While Bartlett chooses to focus mostly on female protagonists, she also comments on the behaviour of such cruel fathers as General Tilney, which enables an analysis of the troubled and conflicting family relationships in Austen's fiction. Mrs. Jennings is such a favourite character with Bartlett that a whole chapter is devoted to the "good-humoured, merry, fat elderly woman": although she is first characterized as "rather vulgar", Mrs. Jennings is increasingly vindicated by the narrative voice for her nobility of soul and generosity towards the Dashwood sisters—despite her low origins in trade—thereby proving Austen's sense of nuance and disregard of social prejudices.

- 5 In the fifth chapter, Bartlett concentrates on *Lady Susan*, probably drafted in the mid-1790s. She highlights the originality of this short novel, whose epistolary form and deeply wicked aristocratic heroine both look back to eighteenth-century fiction, and stand out in Jane Austen's fiction as unique since scheming women are generally used as foils to the more virtuous characters. Interestingly, Lady Susan is a rich, complex, and impressive character who invites us to reassess the fate of powerful, witty and unconventional women struggling "to make a place for themselves in a dangerous world", even as they "mutated into one of the dangers" (92). Chapter six, entitled "In Sickness and in Health: Courting and Nursing in Some Jane Austen Novels", deals with the different roles of illness, real or imagined, and other health-related accidents in the plots. Beyond appearing as a visible sign of goodness in some characters, like Anne Elliot, nursing is significant because it enables the description of "the emotional and physical tenderness between people who share an experience" (101).
- 6 Chapter seven explores the contrasting meanings of "Food in Jane Austen's Fiction" before taking us through a day of eating during the Georgian period. If most of Austen heroines only have a moderate appetite for food—and even starve themselves when struggling with unutterable feelings—, Bartlett notes that "the characters who are shown taking an interest in eating are always comic, often vulgar, and sometimes, like Mr. Hurst, positively beastly" (115). As food habits and housekeeping happen to reveal the characters' emotions, values, or inner flaws, these elements are sometimes used to enhance dramatic moments, or trigger the narrator's satiric voice.
- 7 Chapters eight and nine both deal with *Emma*, but from different perspectives. In "Emma and Harriet: Walking Companions", Bartlett examines the novel's dramatization of Emma and Harriet's relationship, as well as the heroine's shocking vision of "friendship". As Emma has a "disposition to think a little too well of herself", the language of her "infatuation" with Harriet merely "combines patronization with dismissiveness, and almost with contempt" (145). Moreover, the reader only gets to know Harriet Smith through Emma's thoughts and point of view, which reduces the so-called companion to a "useful" plaything and "walking doll". "Emma in the Snow" broaches the influence of the weather on the characters' behaviour, and more particularly, the significance of the snowfall in Chapter fifteen of *Emma*: while the chilly weather may jeopardize the carriages' safety, these harsh atmospheric conditions also prompt the main characters to "act intensely" (152), as when Mr. Elton suddenly makes "violent love" to Emma in an (anti) climactic courting scene.

- 8 “What’s Wrong with *Mansfield Park*” is the main topic discussed in Chapter ten, since Austen’s third published novel is not only “the most difficult”, but also the most puzzling: in this psychological study, the heroine’s silence is of particular significance, as are the licentious *double entendres* and acting triggered by the amateur rehearsal of August von Kotzebue’s play, *Lovers’ Vows*.
- 9 In “Jane Austen and Grandparents”, Bartlett analyses the grandparent-grandchild relationship. If this theme is hardly foregrounded in Austen’s novels, and even completely absent from *Northanger Abbey*, the various representations of grandparents and grandchildren, notably in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion* “enable us to see deeply—though often in a quick, deft, sketch-fashion—into the moral and imaginative lives of Jane Austen’s characters” (177).
- 10 Chapter twelve is devoted to the exploration of some connections between “Jane Austen and [Robert] Burns”, “two writers whose lives overlapped, but who are seldom brought together by literary critics”. Nora Bartlett aptly remarks that *Sanditon* stages a conversation about Robert Burns, which takes place between Charlotte Heywood, a marriageable young woman who is “in need of, but not in quest of, a husband, and a rather “silly young baronet” (187). Although the topic of poetry is discussed satirically, Burns’s verse is used to explore “the connection between feeling and forgetting” that is raised not only in *Sanditon*, but also in *Persuasion* (194). In the last chapter, which concentrates on “*Sanditon* and Suspense”, Bartlett is interested in suspense “not so much of plot, but of style”, as well as in the author’s use of delay, a device she learnt from the sentimental and Gothic novels (210). Ironically and sadly enough, Jane Austen was already very ill when she started writing this novel about sickness and hypochondria, and as she could not complete it, the unfinished nature of the fragment represents “the ultimate element of suspense” (213).
- 11 Illustrated by a wealth of examples, these essays evince highly perceptive and illuminating analyses of Austen’s fictional universe, narrative strategies, and elusive style, especially when Nora Bartlett throws light on the characters’ moments of grace, or on the power and truth of emotions. Jane Stabler has rightly described Bartlett’s methodology as “close reading with an agenda” (xv), since her acute and sympathetic observations both aim at developing the readers’ clear and accurate perception of Austen’s nuanced prose, and their awareness of more political themes, such as women’s economic and social predicament at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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Keywords: accidents, amateur theatricals, aristocracy, bodies, burlesque, childhood, comedy, dancing, death, drama, economy, education, emotion, entail, family life, friendship, games, Gothic fiction, health, hospitality, hypochondria, hysterics, illness, intelligence, invalidism, irony, kindness, London, loneliness, manners, marriage, money, music, novel, nursing, politics, satire, symbolism, sympathy, taste, wit

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AUTHORS

MARIE-LAURE MASSEI-CHAMAYOU

Maître de conférences

Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

marie-laure.massei-chamayou@univ-paris1.fr