

Jane Austen: The Critical Reception

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Although Austen was little known in her own lifetime, shortly after her death her critical ascent began: in 1830 the *Edinburgh Review* acknowledged that “Miss Austen has never been so popular as she deserved to be,” and each succeeding generation has worked to compensate for that early oversight. Today an entire critical industry is devoted to explicating Austen’s small canon. A typical year now sees the publication of more than 150 articles and fifteen critical books on Austen’s life and works, and every critic who discusses the English novel as a genre has to account for her achievement. She has therefore played a part in virtually every wave of literary criticism. She has been subjected to New Critical investigations of irony; she has been put on the couch by Freudians; she has been critiqued for her class consciousness by Marxists; she has been interrogated by disciples of feminism, queer studies, and gender studies. In this essay, Bonnie Blackwell offers an overview of that long critical tradition, beginning with the readings Austen got from her family and close friends and continuing to the present. — J.L.

During his 1868 term as England’s prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) was asked if he found time to read novels. In Disraeli’s surprising reply—“All six of them, every year”—the PM, himself a novelist since the age of twenty-two, obliterates the whole genre of novels from competition for his attention while asserting the utter centrality of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Persuasion* (1818), and *Northanger Abbey* (1818) to British heritage, so well known that they and their author need not be named. Disraeli invites us to imagine what about reading Austen has prepared him to be prime minister or consoled him when the job was fatiguing. We need not puzzle too long on

what aspect of Austen's prose enabled him to give this precisely crafted answer, for her heroines' reading habits are often subject to impertinent queries. Catherine Morland fares poorly when Henry Tilney disparages her taste for "nice books," by which he supposes she means well-bound ones (*Northanger Abbey* 121). Caroline Bingley attempts to lower Lizzy Bennet in Darcy's estimation by sardonically accusing her of being "a great reader who has no pleasure in anything else" (*Pride and Prejudice* 74). Her reply, that "I deserve neither such praise nor such censure," is a model for Disraeli in how to sidestep the intellectual trap of being judged socially for one's private reading; to her creator he gives all the credit.

In this anecdote, a testimony both to Austen's ability to predict human nature and to her lessons in style, we find the dual nature of Austen's reception throughout the nearly two hundred years since the publication of her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, in 1811. Critics address a variety of concerns, from the status of women and the disenfranchised to the price of sugar or barouches, but most critical treatments of Austen fall into two broad camps: those that judge her by a standard of realism, thereby comparing the books to lived experience, either of the Regency or the present; and those that address some aspect of her style, especially her use of irony. Some generations of realist-bound criticism find her books reprehensibly silent on such historical events as the Atlantic slave trade and the Napoleonic Wars. Other critical schools invoke a different strain of realism, the psychological realism of recognizable and nuanced human personalities, and find much to admire in Austen's psychological portraits. Her foolish vicars, more concerned with brokering their own advantageous marriages than with caring for the spiritual lives of their brethren, and her selfish mothers blind to their children's faults continue to resonate with this school.