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Comments
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Austen in Her Time and Ours

The Historical Austen

By William H. Galperin.
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Daniel Traister.

After apologizing for "perhaps too boldly" writing about "the meaning of Frank [Churchill] and Jane [Fairfax]," William H. Galperin proceeds nonetheless to do just that. He is "bold" because who nowadays dares speak of anything quite so elusive as "meaning"? He is also convincing. Indeed, were it only for its chapter on *Emma*, *The Historical Austen* would excite anyone interested in Austen or the history of the English novel. "A book that will revolutionize Jane Austen studies"; "the most important book on Jane Austen's works to appear in the last fifteen years": thus two blurbs on the dustwrapper. Does anyone take blurbs seriously? Yet, *mirabile dictu*, both may actually understate how good Galperin's book is, and how "formidably smart," as the second blurb-writer asserts.

Galperin traces "a trajectory of development where, under imperatives ranging from the aesthetic to the political, Austen's career is demonstrably one of steady transformation." That transformation is "a consequence" of her "steady engagement with a host of problems, formal and cultural." She shows "abiding allegiance to epistolary instability, and the particular reading habits that epistolary 'silence' cultivated and served." Aware "of the naturalizing, indeed regulatory, bent of any art that spoke in the name of either probability or nature," the politically astute Austen also knows "that the subordinate status of women, especially women of privilege, attested to the equally conscribed status of men." (*Conscribed*—an obsolete form, according to OED, 3, of *circumscribed*—is a usage I discuss below.) She reveals an "uncanny alignment with her romantic contemporaries in locating horizons of possibility," which Galperin opposes throughout to "probability," "in quotidian life."

On such bases, Galperin interprets Austen's six complete and several of her incomplete works. He considers her turn from epistolary fiction to narrative based on free indirect discourse, showing how she simultaneously resists both the heightened controls this new form grants and the regulatory impulses those heightened controls reflect. He relates Austen to her romantic contemporaries and to theorists of the picturesque, emphasizing ways in which she maintains her distinctiveness from each. His book is filled with excitements, from reiterated discussions of such terms as "nostalgia," "possibility," and "probability," to specific comments on, for instance, Elizabeth Bennet's encounter with Darcy's portrait at Pemberley.

Galperin's central point is Austen's "success in mediating and resisting what was not only an imperative to fictions of probability at the time but also a charge that, for all its proclaimed neutrality or fidelity to nature, was directed toward the constitution of a

society in which opposition, possibility, and novelty were to be contained." He expands and refines approaches that go back at least as far as Marilyn Butler's 1975 *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. "Re-historicizing" Austen in full awareness of the scholarly tradition that has grown up in Butler's wake, Galperin presents an Austen far less consistently conservative or progressive, far more self-reflexive, and infinitely more complicated than the Austen of much recent scholarship. His book is far richer than any brief review can suggest.

Its rewards, however, are not all that require comment. A writer capable of a word like "conscribed" (above) or who speaks about Frank Churchill's "extreme unction regarding his father's new wife" must fight against his reader's lack of confidence in his critical ability. One expects literary scholars and critics concerned with the medium of language to attend to their own language, exemplifying the acuity with which they attend to that of their subjects. Galperin does no such thing. I have already noted the obsolescence of *conscribe*. *Extreme unction* presents another problem. A sacrament of the Roman Catholic Church, it is, unhappily, not synonymous with *unctuousness*, which is what Galperin appears to mean. Yet another word, *contestional* (240), seems a variant on a word about which OED remarks: "bad form for CONTESTATION."

By pages 204-216, where these solecisms appear, Galperin's persistent reader will already have swallowed much more. His writing repels rather than invites. Sentence structure, for example: I defy any reader properly to construe the paragraph on pages 21-22. Galperin himself, apparently baffled by his own syntax, does not proofread it correctly, missing the transposition in "even as is she incapable" (22; *sic*). Most typos I caught involve missing articles, almost unnoticeable in the general welter of confused syntax. Galperin consistently ignores the ordinary graces of writing. A sentence on page 84 contains 102 words, another, on page 186, 100 words. Do these seem extreme examples? The number of 70-, 80-, and 90-word sentences I paused to count, constantly astonished, is legion.

Galperin's technical language is not something to which I object. Writing for professionals, he uses professional language appropriately. But he deploys it in prose remorselessly uninterested in its own reception. His failure to consider audience is infuriating precisely because this book is so extraordinary. Galperin offers a compellingly revisionist view of Austen's works. But by putting off more readers than it attracts, his prose will, unnecessarily and unjustly, inhibit the widespread reception his illuminating readings deserve. Neither the author nor his press (that of my very own university) has done Galperin's book any favors in editing this text for publication. Its readers have been short-changed, too.