



March 2006

A Peculiarly English "Middle Road"

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Recommended Citation

Traister, D. H. (2006). A Peculiarly English "Middle Road". Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers/25

Postprint version. Published in *Jane Austin Society of North America News, JASNA News*, Volume 22, Issue 1, 2006, 2 pages.

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Abstract

Published in 1975, Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) instantly detached Austen from the constricted world of the "little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with so fine a brush as to produce little effect after much labour." Before Butler, Austen's critics, whether they valued or despised that world, had agreed in finding it by and large confined to her little bit of ivory. Since Butler, Austen's readers see that her fictions, and Austen herself, clearly engage with the great world of her revolutionary times.

Comments

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Jane Austen and the Enlightenment

By Peter Knox-Shaw.

Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Reviewed by Daniel Traister.

Published in 1975, Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) instantly detached Austen from the constricted world of the “little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with so fine a brush as to produce little effect after much labour.” Before Butler, Austen’s critics, whether they valued or despised that world, had agreed in finding it by and large confined to her little bit of ivory. Since Butler, Austen’s readers see that her fictions, and Austen herself, clearly engage with the great world of her revolutionary times.

True, Butler read Austen’s response to that world as reactionary. Publishing in the same year that Margaret Thatcher became the leader of Britain’s Conservative Party and four years before she became Prime Minister, Butler portrayed the rector of Steventon’s daughter as a literary precursor to the Somerville College chemistry student. A conservative (anti-Jacobin) writer suited to a conservative (Thatcherian) time, unlike Thatcher only in the relative geniality of her prune-faced opposition to change, Butler’s Austen satirized anything redolent of political, religious, or social heterodoxy, including expansion of the limited role of women.

Despite (or because of?) its political orientation, Butler’s book changed Austen scholarship. A formidable array of studies now relate Austen to the worlds, among others, of the French Revolution, the Church of England, the Royal Navy, and the economic status and independence of women. This body of work builds on Butler’s major point, Austen’s engagement with the world around her. But almost incidentally, and from several perspectives, it has simultaneously undermined her anti-Jacobin Austen, opposed to intellectually, politically, and socially liberal, progressive, or revolutionary tendencies in her world.

In *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, Peter Knox-Shaw brings under frontal assault “that dismal construct, Jane Austen the Anti-Jacobin.” Other “recent accounts of Jane Austen,” he remarks, “have implicitly opposed the Butlerian thesis.” But “they have done so without providing a rebuttal. The time is ripe... for a study that confronts Butler’s more squarely, and more on its own terms.” His is that study.

In this densely argued, readable, and exceptionally exciting piece of work, Knox-Shaw relates Austen to several strands of Enlightenment philosophical and social thought in the era just before and during her own. He asks his audience to view Austen as a reader and thinker whose fictions embody sociopolitical arguments (Butler, of course, had done no less). But for Knox-Shaw, in the climate in which Austen worked lines between “left,” “right,” and “center” are far more fluid than Butler seemed willing to grant. By patiently

teasing out distinctions between allied yet distinct points of view, his book yields a far richer—and far less conservative—view of the writer than Butler's.

Knox-Shaw reads the novels through varied lenses. Writers about the picturesque, whose political dimensions and disagreements may come as a surprise to some readers, provide his approach to *Pride and Prejudice*. Liberal historians afford him entrée into *Northanger Abbey*. Philosophers of both empiricism and sensibility guide his reading of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Religious revivalists and evangelicals offer him not a straight and narrow, but instead a surprisingly broad pathway to *Mansfield Park*. Theoreticians of sovereignty present him a startling and effective means of considering *Emma*. Those who, like Wollstonecraft, considered the rights of women provide the bases for his reading of *Persuasion*.

Knox-Shaw makes very clear the ways in which the argumentative frameworks which he re-traces, and within which he locates Austen's novels, underlie them. He is equally clear about the complicated positions, by no means single-mindedly opposed to the new or rooted in a supposedly uniform anti-Jacobinism, that Austen herself takes among those arguments. Anti-Jacobinism itself, as Knox-Shaw reminds us, constantly evolved as the Revolution changed and changed again. He painstakingly provides evidence of Austen's reading and her views of what she was reading. He demonstrates verbal echoes and references, not only in her correspondence but also in her novels, to the works that, he argues, Austen used. See, for instance, his acute handling of "abrupt" in *Pride and Prejudice* or of "armed" in *Persuasion*.

Yet Knox-Shaw is so aware of countering a view that has nearly magisterial authority, even though its underpinnings have been gradually eroded in the 30 years since Butler's book first appeared, that his book has a slight tendency to over-argue its case. (Perhaps that is only to say that I was already prepared to find it convincing.) Yet his success in this fine study is a tribute to his cautiously conservative scholarly approach to his materials. His Austen, no precursor to Mrs. Thatcher, is rather a successor to Bishop Hooker, someone similarly able, in a contentious age, to evade extreme positions in order to maintain a peculiarly English *via media*.