

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Anthony Mandal & Brian Southam (eds), *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* (Continuum, 2007)

The sign of a great writer is surely, as Frank Kermode has often asserted, that there will always remain 'shadow' alongside the 'substance' of their work; they will always remain alive for new readers while they are still discussed. They stay modern. This is indisputably the case with Austen: the arguments as to whether she is conservative, or radical, or both, remain open; new and exciting scholarship continues, reading her fiction in terms of neuroscience, cognitive science, and evolutionary psychology. Austen can be seen as a global figure, influencing even Japanese novelists. It is in terms of this desire to extend Austen beyond British boundaries that we have this new volume of essays. And, given political and cultural developments, there could be no better time for a study that implicitly suggests that a canonical British novelist can only be fully understood when they are considered in terms of other cultures.

Of course, there has already been significant work here and there on Austen and Europe, such as that by David Gilson, Noel King, and Andrew Wright. But this is the widest, most major undertaking yet. The fascination lies in the fact that Austen *ought* to be a writer who does not travel: *Emma*, perhaps her greatest novel, contains an apparent extolling of 'English verdure, English culture, English comfort', which is 'sweet to the eye and mind'; Roger Gard (1992) was surely right to suggest that she was 'remarkably unpolitical' for a novelist, and that this inclination was in fact a dominant part of Anglo-Saxon culture.¹ If Austen is strongly 'English', then, this makes her reception abroad doubly interesting. As Mihaela Mudure writes, on Austen and Romania, reception studies can indicate 'ideological and cultural configurations far larger than the individuals involved in the actual transmission-reception process', and 'the extent to which a writer from one culture arouses interest in another may reveal both new aspects in the source writer's work and hidden aspects of the receiving culture' (304). Thus, we learn that the ideal character in nineteenth-century Finnish literature was socially lower than Austen's types, and that, as a culture, they tend towards directness rather than ambiguity and irony. We learn how Greece in the 1800s, a new nation, manifested its nation-building in literature of the type represented by Walter Scott, and that Denmark, after Britain bombarded Copenhagen in 1801 in the battle of the same name, simply, and understandably, took a long time to get over its dislike of all things British. These facts may not be 'hidden', but they are important and timely.

The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe, as well as documenting and charting how Austen's novels have been translated, published, reviewed and researched across Europe over the last two centuries, has an interest that goes beyond that. As an empirical piece of research, this edition is faultless; however, its chief value lies in the stories it tells of British-European relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and of the new ground it opens up in terms of widening Austen scholarship. One of the most insightful essays, Tatjana Jukić's 'Between Bath and Bosnia; Jane Austen

¹ Roger Gard, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

and Croatian Culture', uses Rebecca West's linking of the town of Jajce to Bath to set up a complex but successful argument about inclusion/exclusion and boundaries. Similarly, we are reminded by Marie Nedregotten Sørbo that Norwegian Nobel winner Sigrid Unset published an article comparing Emma Woodhouse to Hedda Gabler. Best of all is the essay that was wisely placed at the end of the book: Catharine Nepomnyaschcy's 'Jane Austen in Russia: Hidden Presence and Belated Boom'. Building on existing work, she argues for a strong link between *Pride and Prejudice* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and then trumps this with a pairing of *Mansfield Park* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. While there has been research that has analysed the possible influence of Goethe on Austen, there is, as this book shows, clearly much to be said – and still to be said – about the way Austen has influenced writers outside Britain, both literary and popular.

Taken in their entirety, the essays prove a number of things. The first is that (like any writer, surely) Austen loses a great deal in translation: the scholars here have worked tirelessly to excavate past translations and demonstrate the good and bad that has been done. Inevitably, the bad is much more entertaining: I particularly enjoyed Sørbo's examples, where Bingley describes Elizabeth Bennett as 'damned nice!!', and Darcy exclaims that 'she is damned well not pretty enough to tempt me' (135-136). Inevitably, too, Austen's irony is lost in translation, and we see her work misunderstood as she is transformed into a purveyor of popular romance. The second unifying factor is that, across Europe, the glut of film and TV adaptations of Austen in 1990s have uniformly made her better known. Although the Austen that has been taken up may be a distorted one, it is surely better that wider audiences are aware of her.

Does this evidence of Austen's growing European and global reputation mean that any accusations of her work being provincial can be laid to rest? Yes and no, for while it shows that her narratives, and her concern with the status of women, are transcultural and transhistorical, the translated Austen being read in Romania, Russia and Greece is not the same Austen as the one being read in English (wherever that may be). *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* proves again how complex this is apparently straightforward writer is; it is not so much the case that Austen can or cannot 'travel'; simply that she has rarely made the journey untarnished.

But the journeys have been many, and whether Austen was translated in her lifetime (France), or not until the 1960s (Russia), there is a story to be told. A volume cannot include everything, but it would be interesting to know the facts behind Austen's reception in Portugal, Bulgaria, Austria, Iceland, the former Czechoslovakia, and the Balkan States (although the detailed timeline at the front of the book includes some relevant information). Given the sheer amount of detailed evidence, and the various areas of enquiry (translation, review, teaching, scholarship), an afterword or summary might help the reader. And the cover: it is a shame to see the famous, prettified simpering Jane Austen, when it has become accepted that the real writer looked nothing like that. There again, the 'real' Jane Austen is a mystery; our perception of the novelist and her works changes through time, which is precisely what this book proves. So perhaps the cover is apt, and the apparent solecism at the heart of a fascinating work that does Austen scholarship proud.

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Book Reviews: *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* edited by Anthony Mandal and Brian Southam. Nick Turner.

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