

BOOK REVIEW

Jane Austen and the Enlightenment

by Peter Knox-Shaw

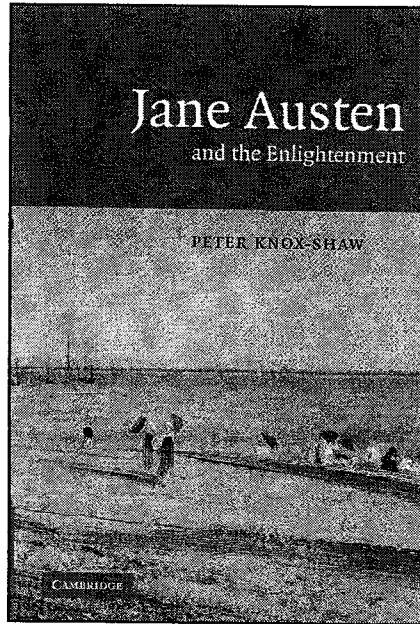
Cambridge University Press,
Cambridge, 2004.

Reviewed by Michael Giffin

Peter Knox-Shaw opens *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (2004) with the lament: 'Historical approaches to Jane Austen have often had the paradoxical effect of sidelining her from history altogether.' To this we must add that historical approaches to Austen are relatively new. Older generations of literary critics took their cues from the cult of sensibility and focussed on the moral and aesthetic autonomy of the author, which they failed to locate in the author's historical context.

Generally speaking, since Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), literary criticism has become more historical. Butler was among the first generation of critics to demonstrate that Austen's novels represent themes commonplace in the literature of her day, and to notice that she situates her work in an intentional relation to the genre of heroine-centred novels. It is now widely acknowledged that Austen's approach is unique and that her genius created a sub-genre in which she stands alone and unrivalled.

Butler created some of the space in which later critics move, including those critics who disagree with her, but she has often been accused of reading Austen as a 'conservative' who wrote novels that defend a 'status quo'. The problem here is obvious, as the concepts 'conservative' and 'status quo' have been glibly applied in Austen studies. It has never been made clear just what they mean in a Georgian context, or what their



opposites are, or what alternatives were available to the rapidly changing and adaptive Georgians. To be fair to Butler, however, it is difficult for critics to articulate a firm position about Austen's historical context without leaving themselves hostage to fortune.

In this sense Butler has long since become a soft target, but from the first page of *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* Knox-Shaw has her firmly in his sights as he maintains a strong sense of how she has left herself hostage to fortune. Knox-Shaw's mission is to confront Butler 'on her own terms' armed with 'the many critical contributions of the last decades' that provide him with the ammunition to do so, without leaving himself a hostage to fortune at the same time. This is not an easy task, and he seeks to accomplish it by repackaging much of what has already been published about Austen's life and work and making a few insightful observations of his own.

Knox-Shaw's profession is research rather than teaching and his style is more allusive than expository. Through this style, which is inductive rather than deductive, he makes it clear to his readers that he has no intention of doing any of the hard work he feels they must do for themselves. For example, large concepts on which his argument depends, such as the Enlightenment, Anglicanism, Evangelicalism, the Picturesque, the Anglo-Scottish tradition (a prism the author invokes and uses in a way that excludes the Irishman George Berkeley, thus omitting one of the figures that dominated British Empiricism), the sceptical philosophy of David Hume, and the economic philosophy of Adam Smith, are never clearly defined and yet allusions to them are woven into the fabric of his study in an oblique way that tells us who this book has been written for, which is the academic researcher not the general reader of Austen.

In *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* there are chapters on each novel, each of which has been given a thematic link to Austen's historical context: *Pride and Prejudice* and the politics of the Picturesque, *Northanger Abbey* and the liberal historians, *Sense and Sensibility* and the philosophers, *Mansfield Park* and charting the religious novel, *Emma* and the flaws of sovereignty, and *Persuasion* and new light on an old genre. Knox-Shaw is at his best, and is most convincing and accessible, when he gets down to discussing the novels themselves, and if he never actually engages in a close reading

of each novel as a whole, or says all that much about them that hasn't already been said, his inductive observations do point to Austen's Enlightenment context and what new material he suggests is intriguing.

I am in broad agreement with the general thrust of Knox-Shaw's argument and my three favourite chapters are on *Emma*, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* respectively, as these seem to me to be more convincing in the way they speak to the novels and their historical context. For example, in the chapter on *Persuasion*, the well-known recognition that Austen takes her heroine into radical new global territory, once of course she matures according to Austen's recipe for maturity, is given an added fillip with the observation that 'the literature that comes under the spotlight' in the novel is that of Scott and Byron, two popular literary figures who write against each other within the same genre. Knox-Shaw notices a Byronic backdrop to Louisa's leap from the Cobb, which suggests that she 'comes a cropper' to show up the consequences of excessive romanticism. The lesson is to be learned primarily by Wentworth, a hero with Byronic attributes, who goes to pieces and is forced to take a back seat, as it were, while the 'anti-romantic' Anne is the only person who can control the consequences of this 'romantic' fall.

Likewise, the chapter on *Northanger Abbey* provides a fine exposition of what Radcliffe is actually trying to achieve in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which is much more than the 'anachronisms and simplifications' of Gothic melodrama and includes an account of 'the rise of a peaceful order from the ruins of feudalism' in Italy, and a description of Austen's quarrel with Radcliffe. Knox-Shaw suggests that Austen is 'a truer exponent of the Anglo-Scottish school' whose 'concern with exactitude and with probability' are 'facets of a thoroughgoing empiricism'. From this he moves on to discuss Austen's representation of the liberal historians of her day, evident from her known choices of reading and the voices of the novel's characters. And as for attributing partisanship to Austen, as many critics have, Knox-Shaw cites the sceptical approach of Hume to show that partisanship is a matter of 'historical distortions' traced 'time and again' to the interests of party, where 'unexamined loyalties' become 'the main breeding ground of myth and untruth'. In other words, to call Austen or Hume partisan is to undermine the empirical tradition in which they

stand, which prides itself on looking at all sides of every question.

The three chapters I find less convincing are those on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*. In the chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*, when considering the significance of Austen's use of metaphors around landscape, those of architecture and garden and arbour and prospect, Knox-Shaw writes well about the estates of Rosings and Pemberley in relation to the Picturesque. To do this line of research justice, however, we need to include Longbourn (long borne) and Netherfield (low field), if only to learn how and why they are excluded from the Picturesque, as well as a clearer explanation of how the Picturesque relates to the Enlightenment, especially to its views about Nature and what is 'natural'.

In the chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*, Knox-Shaw conducts a fine description of how the novel is both a critique of sensibility as well as reclamation of what sensibility ought to be. However, what is missing from this chapter is any reference to, or consideration of, sense. The omission is serious because sense is the other half of the novel's title as well as Austen's measure against which her critique of sensibility is conducted. In order to respect the exquisite symmetry of the novel, and to understand Austen's relationship to the Enlightenment, equal consideration needs to be given to the way in which Elinor represents a critique of sense (neoclassical reason), and to the way in which Marianne represents a critique of sensibility (romantic feeling).

In the chapter on *Mansfield Park*, it is suggested that among the novel's informing principles is Malthus's *Essay on Population*, which exercised 'a strong influence on the rise of Evangelical thought', through which his 'sociological theory' was 'progressively moralized'. But linking Malthus to Evangelicalism implies that he did not influence a wider range of religious thought. Further, Knox-Shaw stresses the importance of recognising that *Mansfield Park* is consciously set in the post-abolition period, but while he makes much of the novel's careful chronology around the politics of slavery and the legislation of abolition, a subject that has already been adequately covered by others, he implies that Evangelicalism was the only party to take a moral stance against slavery. Also, Knox-Shaw reads Fanny as an Evangelical character but he apparently contradicts himself by saying that Austen's analysis of her growth 'owes nothing to

Evangelical belief' and indeed 'the emancipatory tenets for which the revival was famous are applied throughout *Mansfield Park* in a way that is often contradictory to its spirit'.

As an Anglican, I was interested in how *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* managed the still largely-uncharted waters of Austen and the Anglicanism of the Enlightenment. Knox-Shaw gets off to a good start by declaring that Austen was not the Evangelical she is so often claimed to be, and by objecting to 'the old and long-entrenched view that Christianity and the Enlightenment were as chalk and cheese'. He insists, instead, that Austen was something called an 'Anglican Erasmian', an undefined term attributed by way of a footnote to a book written by Hugh Trevor-Roper in 1987 not long after his career was marred for having validated dozens of volumes of Hitler's diaries that were later revealed to be forgeries. A Google search of the term reveals only one link, which is to a PDF of Knox-Shaw's single reference to it, but I suspect he means that Austen was a Christian humanist.

Unfortunately, Knox-Shaw says nothing that really advances an understanding of Austen and the Anglicanism of the Enlightenment. The problem here is that, like most critics, Knox-Shaw is unable to think of Austen's Anglicanism except in relation to Evangelicalism, a position that has become something of a cul-de-sac in Austen studies. By this I mean that while Knox-Shaw makes many oblique religious references, he never really turns the concept of 'not Evangelical' into a broader vision of what Austen's Anglicanism actually is or how it situates itself in relation to the Enlightenment. This throws us back into the uncharted territory of 'not Evangelical', which is the territory in which most Georgian Anglicans lived and through which mainstream Anglicanism has developed. Austen lived in an age where there was still an organic relationship between society and religion; she has an identifiable religious position that is not Evangelical, and her novels reflect that position. The highly-secularised post-Christian world of Austen studies needs to develop a stronger grasp of the religion Austen practised and professed and how it is reflected in her novels, even though those novels are not apparently religious.

In pacing about the cul-de-sac, Knox-Shaw notes that Evangelicalism may be linked in an oblique way to the Enlightenment ('the sort of

rationalism that stressed the limits of reason clearly suited the book of a movement that set great store by beliefs, inner lights, and intuition.');

suggests, without providing convincing evidence, that Austen was sympathetic towards Evangelicalism even though she disliked Evangelicals ('writers did not feel obliged to be Evangelical in order to comment on Evangelicalism'); and proposes the idea, which places a bet each way, that while *Mansfield Park* is a 'profoundly secular' novel, its hero and heroine, Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price, are characters with strong Evangelical sympathies. Unfortunately, Knox-Shaw provides no evidence from the novel to support this view, and particularly in the case of Edmund it is difficult to reconcile Evangelical sympathies with either his general demeanour and discourse throughout the novel or his attraction to someone as worldly (and, in Austen's terms, as downright evil) as Mary Crawford as a potential wife. Clearly, *Mansfield Park* is anything but 'profoundly secular', being a carefully-crafted expression of Austen's belief in the need for spiritual renewal and ecclesiological reform, as well as the description of her program for how they might come about. But in accessing Austen's belief and program we need to understand that Evangelicalism was not the only religious catalyst in the Anglicanism of her period.

This is not to denigrate what Knox-Shaw has achieved, and his criticisms of Butler are certainly valid. But there is much more to say about Austen and the Enlightenment than Knox-Shaw has said, and there is a sense in which Butler has handed on the baton to us, so to speak, and we are better off running with it rather than bashing her with it. Literary criticism is at its best when it is most collegiate, when it develops good will and solidarity and builds up the kind of social capital we find among the Jane Austen societies in Britain, North America, and Australia.

If literary critics get it right that is good but if we get it wrong then that is not always bad. As Frank Kermode once said in 1986, in a sermon preached before Cambridge University in King's College Chapel: 'The history of interpretation, the skills by which we keep alive in our minds the light and dark of past literature and past humanity, is to an incalculable extent a history of error'. But Kermode also suggests that error has its uses and can provide a 'fruitful misunderstanding' when 'we want to have

more of the story than was originally offered', when we 'want to see into the depths' of the story at those times when we are 'pretty sure that the literal sense is not enough' to satisfy us. All of us who research and write about Austen's historical context belong to this world of 'fruitful misunderstanding', including Butler and Knox-Shaw.

We want to know more than we know and there is still much for us to learn. In a collegiate spirit, and in the interests of building up social capital, we now welcome *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* as we once welcomed *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*.