**Eighteenth-Century Fiction**

Volume 24 | Issue 3 Article 15

March 2012

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Barbara Seeber

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Recommended Citation

Seeber, Barbara (2012) "Review of: Mona Scheuermann, *Reading Jane Austen*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 24: Iss. 3, Article 15.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol24/iss3/15

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# Review of: Mona Scheuermann, *Reading Jane Austen*

**Abstract**
Book review/compte rendu

Mona Scheuermann, *Reading Jane Austen*

**Keywords**
book review, compte rendu

This article is available in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol24/iss3/15

l'ouvrage regorge d'analyses riches et stimulantes qui, la plupart du temps ne sont, pas directement liées à la problématique. Par exemple, les développements consacrés à l'ironie, au réalisme bourgeois et à l'esthétique du terrible témoignent d'une force analytique exceptionnelle. L'auteure, qui manie admirablement le corpus de l'époque, circule habilement entre des textes divers, en aval comme en amont des *Tableaux*, et jongle adroitement avec les données sociohistoriques, les discours philosophiques et les enjeux esthétiques. En plus d'ajouter une pierre à l'édifice de la critique merciérienne, cette étude jette un éclairage nouveau sur l'ensemble des Secondes Lumières et fournit des pistes de réflexion importantes sur la gestion de l'héritage des Lumières par les philosophes de la deuxième génération.

**Geneviève Boucher** est professeure adjointe au Département de français de l'Université d'Ottawa. Spécialiste de la prose d'idées des Secondes Lumières et de l'imaginaire révolutionnaire, elle travaille actuellement à la publication de sa thèse de doctorat sur la représentation du temps historique dans l'œuvre de Louis Sébastien Mercier.

Mona Scheuermann. *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. x+210pp. US$80. ISBN 978-0-230-61877-0.

Mona Scheuermann argues that "the world we see in Austen's novels ... represents the core of the values of her time" (10). Austen "never questioned what she saw as God-given values" (10) and "has an unquestioned moral compass" (133), "giv[ing] us as readers a feeling of comfort and security" (181). *Reading Jane Austen* examines a range of moral questions such as charity in *Emma*, and patronage and the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*. The latter novel, which Scheuermann sees as central in the Austen canon, is the focus of this study, allowing for detailed readings of passages which, in other accounts, sometimes get short shrift: Fanny's homecoming in Portsmouth, for example. The book's structure is innovative. Part 1, titled "A Moral Tapestry," contains three chapters on *Mansfield Park* before moving to Part 2, "Social Grids" (a chapter each on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*) and Part 3, "Politics and History" (with only one chapter, it lacks development). The exclusion of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*, both mentioned only once, seems arbitrary. *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* are the "major novels" and the "most popular" (3), but apart from these two comments in the introduction, no reasoning is provided for the omission of two of Austen's novels (never mind "Sanditon," "The Watsons," "Lady Susan," or the early writings).

While Scheuermann situates Austen alongside Thomas Gisborne and especially Hannah More, she does not consider her "conservative": Austen "is not writing in defense of the status quo. Rather, she is writing about a culture where the values are so obvious that they seem to be all the world there is" (10). This attempt to sidestep the knotty problem of Austen's politics lacks persuasiveness. The final chapter breezily surveys radical revolutionary politics, the war with France, enclosures, industrialization, and food riots during Austen's lifetime, and thus it is unclear how the argument holds that Austen "represents the core of the values of her time." Given that, as the opening sentence of the chapter on "Politics and History" puts it, "England from the 1790s was a jittery nation" (169), there clearly was debate about "core values." And while Scheuermann does not neglect to state that Austen was "aware of a good deal of what was happening in her world" (10), Austen chose to "leave out many of the stressors of her time," instead "writing romances, in the sense that we use the word today, that is, escapist fiction" (171). But, even if we accept this reading, "escapist fiction" surely comes with a politics of its own. We also might say the same of Scheuermann's book, which proposes to rise above the supposedly narrow terms of feminist and postcolonial criticism. (As an aside, the endorsements chosen by Palgrave Macmillan speak of Austen's "liberat[ion]" from recent criticism. The chivalrous notion of Austen as an author in distress is curiously persistent.)

I could locate only four specific in-text citations to Austen scholars; the rather thin critical engagement is relegated to endnotes. Most striking is the casualness with which the postcolonial debate surrounding *Mansfield Park* is raised, and dismissed, in one parenthetical comment: "there should be honest commitment to the profession chosen, not simply a desire to milk it of whatever one can. This is true for the landowner, who should be a careful landlord or master, as Sir Thomas is when he journeys all the way to Antigua (and no, there is no support for the idea that these references show Austen being concerned with the slave trade, as some recent critics have insisted)" (58). Here, as elsewhere, "reading Jane Austen" (as per the book's vague title) is presented as a transparent activity. Scheuermann repeatedly appeals to what was allegedly obvious to Austen and her readers; only "time, distance, and political correctness ... make it difficult for modern readers" (47) to properly understand the novels. But it is not clear to me how Scheuermann arrives at her certainty about Austen's certainties. For example, she claims that Fanny's, Edmund's, and Sir Thomas's position on the theatricals is unequivocally Austen's. This is, of course, a very familiar take, but there are various contrary readings which need to be considered. Key texts on the topic such as Penny Gay's *Jane Austen and the Theatre* are simply unmentioned. Moreover,

Scheuermann's reading, at times, seems forced. She states that "even ... Julia ... is distinctly uncomfortable when she realizes what words and actions will be required of her" if she takes the part of Amelia (42), but surely Julia is driven by jealousy not morality: if she cannot be Agatha to Crawford's Frederick, she refuses to take part. Scheuermann claims that "as soon as we place [*Mansfield Park*] within its contemporary context, all difficulties ... are resolved" (37), but since when is it the goal of literary criticism, or reading in general, to do so? Austen "presents precisely the conservative moral agenda that was typical of her class. There is no mystery here" (37). At the risk of stating the obvious, isn't it precisely the fact that we can never fully unlock the "mystery" that keeps us returning to Austen (or any artist?). Many of the points presented as incontrovertible are far from being so. For example, Scheuermann remarks that Austen's "family ... by all accounts was close and loving" (14) and cites Mary Lascelles ("one of Austen's most charming biographers") and her 1939 *Jane Austen and Her Art* in support. Others might disagree. Similarly, positing Austen's "own preference" of *Mansfield Park*, she writes, "Jane Austen said that she found ... *Pride and Prejudice* too frothy" (14). This is a questionable gloss of her famous description of the novel as "rather too light & bright & sparkling; ... it wants to be stretched out here & and there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story" (*Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 203). Scheuermann drains Austen's prose, here and elsewhere, of irony, satire, and, ultimately, the complexity that keep us rereading Jane Austen.

The conversational tone makes the book accessible, but in other respects it is not reader-friendly. It does not use the standard editions of Austen (the new Cambridge editions or Chapman's Oxford); nor are the choices consistent: both Broadview and Norton editions are used. The impressionism of the prose is less than helpful and at odds with the absolutism that Scheuermann sees in Austen: the final section of *Pride and Prejudice* is "full of wit and gentleness" (107), "charming" (110, 111) and "lovely" (111); similarly, *Persuasion*'s "last eighty or so pages are among the most charming that Austen wrote" (159). Proofreaders should have caught such typos as: "Pendleton" (7) for Pemberley; "Highwood" (134) for Highbury, presumably, or Hartfield. Julia Bertram is confused with Maria Bertram (79). The most serious lapse in proofreading occurs on page 175 where the reader is unable to distinguish between Scheuermann's own words, (in)direct quotation, and paraphrase.

**Barbara K. Seeber**, associate professor of English at Brock University, specializes in Jane Austen as well as animal studies.