

Review

Janine Barchas, *The Lost Books of Jane Austen*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 284pp. ISBN: 1421431599. £26.00 hc.

This is a truly remarkable and fascinating book. At one level, it is an exercise in book history, recovering a lost tranche of books that enable a critical story to be told about Jane Austen's historical reputation. It is also an exercise in book analysis, closely observing details of the design and construction of individual volumes, to tell a story about the provenance and circulation of particular publications. At yet another level, it gleans evidence from signatures and inscriptions, to construct 'vignettes' about the lives of individual volumes – as they go through the hands of the very wealthy, of working class men and women, and even of soldiers in World War 1.

Barchas' book is a myth-buster. According to the standard story, Jane Austen fell out of favour for many years from shortly after her death in 1817, and only returned to favour towards the end of the nineteenth century. This view of her was indicated and strongly supported by the standard catalogues of publications of her work, most notably David Gilson's 1982 catalogue of editions of her works. It is also supported by the amount of attention given to critical responses to her work by, among others, Mark Twain (who did an equivalent hatchet job with somewhat of the same effect on someone whom I and Roger Sabin researched many years ago, James Fenimore Cooper). Austen's reputational recovery, so another part of the standard story goes, came with her becoming identified clearly as having a *feminine sensibility*, appealing above all else to female readers.

Barchas delves very deeply among the residues of lost books, in booksellers' remainders, private collections and obscure libraries (though not many of these collected what she is interested in) to construct a different story altogether. In Britain and America, where her focus falls, there were very many cheap, often giveaway (advertising promotions, school or church prizes), but often simply making use of cheaply obtained 'stereotypes' (a printers' term for reusable type-sets). Prices fluctuated wildly, but fell to pennies for the cheapest (often with very poor quality paper and binding, which of course hastens their demise and which means that few survive in anything like pristine condition). More than a hundred editions had gone unrecorded until her research. Sometimes these were even set alongside publications of very different provenance: Dime Novels, Penny Dreadfuls

(although they would be carefully marked off, as Penny Delightfuls). In the 1820s a number of cheap editions hinted at a similarity between devotion to Jane, and Christian adoration. The rise of the railways led to cheap editions being sold through station outlets. Lever Brothers, the soap manufacturers, offered free editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* as prizes in marketing competitions in the 1890s. Perhaps most fascinating is her recovery of World War 1 editions for soldiers in the trenches – about whom Rudyard Kipling wrote a sneery essay, ‘The Janeites’, in 1924.

Barchas has done an extraordinary job tracking down and documenting in rich detail a whole raft of different editions, tracing publishers, print ancestries, and probable circulations. But she rightly sees her work as a contribution to a reception history of Austen. Very careful not to claim that just because an edition was published by Lever Bros, it must have inculcated values of cleanliness and the home, she nonetheless poses the right questions about the significance of these various routes into all kinds of homes and collections. And her ‘vignettes’, where she has tracked down stories of particular owners/readers through censuses and other historical sources, are delightful.

I loved this book. It demonstrates the sheer power of careful gathering, documenting and analysis of small details. It picks out the story of, and thereby challenges, the recent ‘pinking’ of Austen, as someone just for women readers. It invites a dozen parallel enquiries into authors similarly cramped (and now I wish I had kept my – admittedly much smaller and less systematic – collection of Cooper editions, to give them the kind of scrutiny Barchas gives all hers). And finally, hers is just a beautiful book in itself. In its look (cover, print, design), its paper quality, its many, many colour reproductions of these lost editions, it is just a pleasure to have and to read.

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