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***Reading Jane Austen*, by Mona Scheuermann (2009) ; *Reading Jane Austen*, by Mona Scheuermann (2012) ; *Why Jane Austen?*, by Rachel M. Brownstein**

Karen Gevirtz
Seton Hall University, Karen.gevirtz@shu.edu

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Keywords

Jane Austen, Rachel Brownstein, Mona Scheuermann, popularization, reading, eighteenth-century studies, Austen studies

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Mona Scheuermann, *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. \$95.00. 1-195. Index. ISBN: 978-0-230-61877-0.

Mona Scheuermann, *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. \$28.00. 1-195. Index. ISBN: 978-0-230-340-19-0.

Rachel M. Brownstein, *Why Jane Austen?* New York: Columbia UP, 2011. \$29.50. Index. ISBN: 978-0-231-15390-4.

Reviewed by Karen Gevirtz, Seton Hall University

The abstract for an ASECS panel entitled, “Has Jane Austen Jumped the Shark?” inquires, “Do ‘I [heart] Darcy’ undergarments and Jane action figures undermine the status of this great writer? Can an author experience too much hype—even 200 years in?” Indeed. In this view, literary studies is a passive beneficiary of Austen’s popularization—“ . . . Hollywood has helped to propel Jane Austen to a unique level of superstar status—with even eighteenth-century studies reaping the benefits of her popularity in the classroom,” the abstract notes—and as a hapless victim—“What, if anything, is left to thrill or shock readers in Austen studies now?”

Two monographs, Mona Scheuermann’s *Reading Jane Austen* and Rachel Brownstein’s *Why Jane Austen?*, each outlines a very active role for literary studies in Austen’s superstardom. While considerably different in all respects, these works affirm that the relationship between the academy and popularization is a two-way street and provide evidence that there is quite a lot left to thrill or shock readers in Austen studies now.

Scheuermann’s *Reading Jane Austen* is intended to show that “the world we see in Austen’s novels, the morality that informs her fiction, represents the core of the values of her time” (10). In this formulation, despite being aware of “the French revolution and, through her brothers, the contemporary wars,” Austen, “like [Thomas] Gisborne and [Hannah] More and the vast majority of her contemporaries . . . never questioned what she saw as God-given values” (10). For Scheuermann, Austen’s society is happily homogeneous; to reflect and affirm this unanimity is Austen’s mission. Scheuermann simply explains the values and where to find them in the novels.

Reading Jane Austen possesses an introduction entitled “Truths Universally Acknowledged” and three parts—“A Moral Tapestry,” “Social Grids,” and “Politics and History”—containing among them seven chapters. The book addresses only *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, as they are Austen’s “major novels,” according to Scheuermann (3, 87). Three chapters discussing *Mansfield Park* compose Part I; the three chapters of Part II explicate *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* respectively; and the single chapter of Part III describes Austen’s historical context. Scheuermann justifies the emphasis on *Mansfield Park* because “[t]he pattern of these moral issues, while it is present in all of Austen’s major novels, is most prominent in *Mansfield Park* . . .” (3). In Chapter 1, Scheuermann points out the ways in which Austen sees wealth and morality overlapping, particularly in terms of patronage. In Chapter 2, Scheuermann explains why the text of *Lover’s Vows*, the unperformed play in *Mansfield Park*, is sexually transgressive for the early nineteenth century. In Chapter 3, she shows how Austen considers “good breeding” necessary to “an ordered, decent society” in *Mansfield Park* (78). The chapters of Part II, “Social Grids,” depend upon the framework established through this attention to *Mansfield Park*. Chapter 4 on *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 5 on *Emma*, and Chapter 6 on

Persuasion demonstrate how each novel articulates Austen's beliefs that class is and should be static, that rich people should take care of poor people, and that virtue is expressed in the exercise of benevolence. The conclusion, "The World of Jane Austen," describes the historical, political, and military events of the early nineteenth century. The placement of this chapter is somewhat baffling, as it claims to provide what would seem to be crucial contextual information yet follows six chapters which contend that Austen's novels are direct expressions of Austen's context.

Initially, *Reading Jane Austen* seems to suffer from identity confusion. It has footnotes, an index, and repeated references to authors like Hannah More and Thomas Paine, suggesting it aims at a scholarly audience. This scholarly apparatus is vestigial and the book's argument is reductive, however. "So the world we see in Austen's novels, the morality that informs her fiction, represents the core of the values of her time," Scheuermann explains. "Austen writes in a period of great political ferment and seemingly endless war, . . . but so self-evident are her values for Austen that she does not write in defense of the status quo: for that to be the case, she would have had to recognize a challenge to that structure and be responding to it" (10). Apparently, living in the early nineteenth century and reading Austen's novels are both quite simple. Similarly, when Scheuermann observes that "[t]he decency, moral and aesthetic, that permeates Austen's novels is immensely comfortable" (2), she is articulating the nostalgic thinking at the core of Janeite ideology or the fetishization of the English past in heritage films.

If not a scholarly audience, perhaps Scheuermann aims at a popular one. As Linda Troost and others have pointed out, Austen's readers are eager to learn more about her life and times as well as literary history. Considered in this light, Scheuermann seems to be offering a sort of academic *Michelin Guide to Jane Austen*, a gently academic book to help a "modern reader" looking for something unchallengingly intellectual. Advising readers of *Mansfield Park* to "take the concerns, the assumptions, the moral judgments, even the descriptions of the countryside, at face value, . . ." Scheuermann reassures her own audience that "[w]hen we recognize the accuracy of Austen's portrayal of her society, the book no longer seems a problem novel" (13). The style is often friendly and chatty; the short, declarative title positions the book as an accessible authority. It is a comfortably slender volume whose paper cover features a decorative design resembling popular conceptions of nineteenth-century wallpaper or the embroidery in the opening sequence of the Ehle/Firth version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

If Scheuermann is targeting a popular audience, however, she does them no favors. The book is punctuated by factual errors—Sir Thomas Bertram is repeatedly called "Lord Bertram" (19), Pemberley becomes "Pemberton" (7), Hartfield becomes "Highwood" (134), for example. Reductive thinking and basic reading errors are no more appropriate for a popular audience than for a scholarly one. Furthermore, readers outside the ivory tower are perfectly capable of grasping and appreciating the complexities of history, politics, religion, morality, and Austen's novels. Thus, when it comes to the first question—does eighteenth-century studies contribute to Austen's cultural over-exposure?—Scheuermann's book, propounding nostalgia for a mythological, simpler time and decorated with the occasional footnote, suggests that it does. Like many other popularizing efforts, this text disguises itself as substantive insight while stripping Austen, her work, and her times of their compelling and engaging complexity.

In contrast, Rachel Brownstein's *Why Jane Austen?* provides convincing evidence that there is a great deal left to thrill readers in Austen studies now. Brownstein probes the phenomenon of Jane Austen and "Jane Austen": the nature of her cultural position, how she came to occupy it, the function she serves in that position, and the reasons why she continues to hold sway even if the nature of her influence is changeable. In this regard, Austen's readers take our place under Brownstein's microscope alongside Austen, the novels, the novel as a genre, and literary history. As if responding to Scheuermann, Brownstein states,

Contrary to the main current of popular opinion today, Jane Austen's novels are not first of all and most importantly about pretty girls in long dresses waiting for love and marriage; and they are not most importantly English and Heritage, small and decorous and mannerly and pleasant. Read with any degree of attention, they do not work well as escape reading: there are too many hardheaded observations and hard, recalcitrant details in them. (247)

The phenomenon that Scheuermann's book shamelessly exploits, that is, Austen's cultural celebrity, is the subject of Brownstein's thoughtful and thought-provoking study: "I am interested in why Jane Austen is on our minds now, and in her relationship to her characters and her readers . . . and—most broadly—in the ways that imaginary others, historical and fictitious, inhabit and inform minds and lives" (12). This is truly engaging work as it deepens current analyses, offers new insights and new methodologies, and moves comprehensively, sometimes elegantly and often wittily through a compendious body of material.

Brownstein's study has an introduction and four chapters. Chapter 1, "Why We Read Jane Austen" divides its inquiry into three parts: "Questions of Truth," "Questions of Interpretation," and "Jane Austen in Contexts." Each section explores a different aspect of the act of reading Austen (the woman) and Austen (the novels). If the opening pages of Chapter 1 occasionally feel self-indulgent in their autobiographical focus, the function of that insistent return to personal history becomes evident as the study unfolds: Brownstein uses herself as a case study, teasing out the way experience, desire, and education—in short, her own context—led her to create contexts for Austen, a theme she then pursues in frequent, productive variations through the rest of *Why Jane Austen?* Chapter 2, "Looking for Jane," pins down Austen's literary biographers as a group like butterflies in a case, specimens whose behavior and appearance Brownstein coolly explains. Chapter 3, "Neighbors," argues that Austen not only watched her own neighbors but used the fact of neighbors' awareness of observing and being observed as part of the subject and the mechanism of her fiction. In Chapter 4, "Authors," Brownstein situates Austen among other authors, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Lord Byron, Henry James' fictional Jeffrey Aspern, and Ian McEwan's Briony from *Atonement*. Her particular interest is the chemistry between author and reader that makes people use texts to conjure an image of an author. Chapter 5, "Why We Reread Jane Austen," unpacks layer after layer of Austen's art, showing some of the riches found by returning to Austen's work repeatedly. *Why Jane Austen?* concludes with "Afterwords," in which Brownstein reflects on different populations' responses to and uses for Austen and the larger role of fiction in what Brownstein unselfconsciously calls "civilization."

Each chapter and the book overall are deeply satisfying and demanding. "Why We Reread Jane Austen" is perhaps the best, a virtuosic performance. But Brownstein's analysis anywhere and

everywhere in this book is worth savoring; additional layers of insight, artistry, and connection reveal themselves over time like flavors in a complex dish. Comprehensive and sharp-eyed as this study is, however, its greatest gift is that it provokes the urge to still more critical thought. To the question of whether eighteenth-century studies has been complicit in the popularization of Austen, Brownstein's book answers yes but rejects the idea that that complicity is all bad. To the question of whether Austen studies has anything left to offer, Brownstein's book offers a resounding affirmative: Austen studies most certainly has a great deal left to thrill and to shock us—and also to enlighten, agitate, and inspire.