

“Finished up to nature”: Walter Scott’s Review of *Emma*

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Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. – It is not fair. – He has Fame and Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths. – I do not like him, & do not mean to like *Waverley* if I can help it – but fear I must. ¹

Jane Austen is writing to her niece Anna in September 1814, shortly after the publication of Walter Scott’s first novel, *Waverley*, which had appeared anonymously in July. The mixture of admiration, rivalry and amusement here is characteristic of the remarks in her correspondence and novels on her slightly older and much more famous contemporary. In previous letters she had mentioned *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), parodied two lines from *Marmion* (1808), and compared her small family gatherings ironically with those in *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). Later, she took notice of Scott’s poem *The Field of Waterloo* (1815), his travel book *Paul’s Letters to his Kinsfolk* (1816), and his novel *The Antiquary* (1816) (*Letters*, 274, 298, 290, 431, 432, 468). In Austen’s novels, too, there are several allusions to Scott’s poetry. Marianne Dashwood admires it; Fanny Price quotes from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*; Captain Benwick is “intimately acquainted” with all of Scott’s poems, which Anne Elliot also enjoys; and Sir Edward Denham quotes from both *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*.²

Scott, however, was not only the most celebrated British poet of the first decade of the nineteenth century and, from the publication of *Waverley* in 1814 until his death in 1832, by far the best-selling and most critically appreciated novelist. He was also, with Hazlitt, the leading critic of his age, and it is as critic, rather than poet or novelist, that he is of primary importance to students of Austen. In a letter of 1813 to Cassandra, Austen wrote her famous ironic analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel was, she claimed with mock gravity, “rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with ... something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté” (*Letters*, 299-300). Austen, of course, was never to write a history of Napoleon or an essay on Scott. Scott, however, not only published, in 1827, an immense, nine-volume *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, but in 1816 wrote a review of *Emma* that was to have a significant effect on Austen’s critical standing.

The importance of Scott’s review, which runs to some 5,000 words, derived initially not from the name of the reviewer but from the intrinsic strength of the essay and from the stature of the journal in which it appeared, *The Quarterly Review*. Like all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century review journals, the *Quarterly* published its reviews anonymously: few readers in 1816 could have known of Scott’s authorship. But the *Quarterly* itself carried a tremendous *cachet*; a substantial laudatory review such as that of *Emma* brought the same prestige as one today in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books* or *JASNA News*. Conversely, of course, a damning review such as John Wilson Croker’s vituperative essay on Keats in the *Quarterly Review* for 1818 could do an author’s reputation immeasurable damage. Founded in 1809 with the active support of Scott under the editorship of William Gifford, as a Tory counterpart to the Whig dominated *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly* rapidly established itself with the *Edinburgh* as one of the two leading journals of the age. Among its stable of reviewers were several prominent critics, including Scott, Croker, George Ellis, and Robert Southey.³ It was published by John Murray, a highly successful London publisher, whose authors included both Scott and Austen, as well as Southey, Leigh Hunt, and Byron. Murray might have been expected to seek favourable reviews in the *Quarterly* for the authors he published, but this seems not to have been the case. Editorial control was exercised by Gifford, who revised contributions as he saw fit, but not by the publisher Murray.

In September 1815, after reading *Emma* in manuscript in his capacity as literary advisor to Murray, Gifford informed the publisher: “I have nothing but good to say. I was sure of the writer before you mentioned her.” He also undertook to polish the manuscript, which “though plainly written, has yet some, indeed many little omissions; and an expression may now and then be amended in passing through the press.” Gifford, therefore, was responsible for editing both *Emma* and Scott’s review. It was, however, Murray who commissioned the review for the *Quarterly*. In a letter to Scott of 25 December 1815, he enquired: “Have you any fancy to dash off an article on ‘Emma’? It wants incident and romance, does it not? None of the author’s other novels have been noticed [in the *Quarterly*], and surely ‘Pride and Prejudice’ merits high commendation.” Scott accepted the commission, and while he may not have dashed off his essay, he completed it promptly. On 19 January 1816 he sent it to Murray, observing that he had no wish to see proofs, as Gifford could “correct all obvious errors, and abridge it where necessary.”⁴

For modern admirers of Austen, the tone of this exchange between Murray and Scott is disconcertingly frivolous. The publisher of the *Quarterly Review* seems to be prejudicing his chosen reviewer against *Emma* by declaring that it lacks “incident and romance.” Scott, in turn, seems to have taken the task lightly in waiving his right to see proofs. We should, however, be aware that in the early nineteenth century the novel was still regarded primarily as light entertainment. In taking notice of an obscure female novelist, and in commissioning a review from the greatest man of letters of his age, Murray was tacitly acknowledging the particular significance of *Emma*: only a very few of the hundreds of contemporary novels would ever be so favoured. And in asking Scott to “dash off” an essay on an unjustly neglected author, Murray

was posing a challenge calculated to elicit Scott's response. One of Scott's aims in the review, moreover, was to question the prevailing attitude to novel-writing and hence, of course, to create a more favourable climate for his own fiction.

When Scott wrote his review of *Emma*, he had already published two novels of his own – *Waverley* (1814) and *Guy Mannering* (1815) – and had a third, *The Antiquary*, almost ready for the press. They were, needless to say, antithetical to Austen's fiction in every respect: large-scale, historical, set in Scotland, and written with exuberant panache, rather than painstaking attention to detail. Despite their huge sales and generally favourable reviews, no critic suggested that they were major literary achievements. Thus Francis Jeffrey, in a largely positive review of *Waverley* in the *Edinburgh Review*, observed that in considering the novel at length he had “trespassed indeed considerably on space which we had reserved for more weighty matters.”⁵ Scott's review of *Emma*, accordingly, begins with some interesting general reflections on the state of the novel. While acknowledging its remarkable popularity among readers who eschew other kinds of writing, but are enchanted by the “universal charm of narrative,” Scott insists that “the composition of these works admits of being exalted and decorated by the higher exertions of genius.”⁶ There is an intriguing resemblance between Scott's defence of the novel and that of Austen in the famous *Northanger Abbey* passage, probably written by 1803 but not published until 1818. Scott does not, admittedly, go as far as Austen's narrator, who depicts the novel as a work “in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (38). But his defence of novels against those who condemn them in public while enjoying them in private is in marked contrast to typical early nineteenth-century fulminations against novel-writing, some of which can be found in the first reviews of Austen's novels.

A recurring feature of these reviews is a complaint about the sheer number of novels being published. Thus the reviewer of *Sense and Sensibility* in the *Critical Review* for 1812 declares: “We are no enemies to novels or novel writers, but we regret, that in the multiplicity of them, there are so few worthy of any particular commendation.” The *British Critic*, reviewing *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, observed that “it is very far superior to almost all the publications of the kind which have lately come before us”: a double-edged compliment, given the reviewer's evident contempt for the genre to which the work belongs. Reviewing *Emma* in 1816, the same journal insisted that “it rarely happens that in a production of this nature we have so little to find fault with” and announced that “of fanatical novels and fanatical authoresses we are already sick.” The *Gentleman's Magazine* begins its review of *Emma* with a quotation from Horace, “*dulce est desipere in loco*” (it is pleasant to indulge in trifles), and concedes disarmingly that “a good Novel is now and then an agreeable relaxation from severer studies.”⁷ In a similarly patronising tone, the reviewer of *Emma* in *The Champion* terms it “a species of light satire for which the delicate tact of female minds is admirably adapted.” The *British Lady's Magazine*, reviewing *Emma* together with Amelia Opie's *St. Valentine's Eve*, claims that “two or three novels generally exhaust the inventive faculties of authors in this line.”⁸ A review of Scott's *The Antiquary* in the previous issue, perhaps by the same reviewer, contended likewise that most novelists “decline after a second or third production of consequence, because there is infinitely less variety in human nature than is generally supposed.”⁹

It is in the context of reviews such as this that Scott's piece on *Emma* must be considered. His essay is remarkable in two respects: it takes the much belittled genre of the novel more seriously than could have been expected in 1816, and it looks more closely and incisively at *Emma* than any other essay was to do for several decades. This was accomplished probably without knowledge of Austen's authorship – information that would not become generally available until Henry Austen's biographical notice of 1818 – beyond the fact that *Sense and Sensibility*, and hence the other novels, were written “by a Lady.”

When Scott undertook his review of *Emma* he was already a critic of great experience and a practised reviewer of prose fiction. For the *Edinburgh Review* he had reviewed Godwin's *Fleetwood* (1804), and for the *Quarterly*, Cumberland's *John de Lancaster* (1809) and Maturin's *The Fatal Revenge* (1810). He had written an introduction to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1811, and an essay on *Gulliver's Travels* as part of his edition of the works of Swift (1814). Later, he was to write a series of major essays on the eighteenth-century novel, from Defoe, Richardson and Fielding to Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe, as well as further reviews of his contemporaries and a series of extensive prefaces to his own novels.¹⁰ The review of *Emma* marks an important point in Scott's development as a critic of fiction. Here, for the first time, he outlined his concept of the development of the novel form. Readers of his later criticism will find, more fully developed, many ideas first adumbrated in the review of *Emma*.

After his prefatory remarks on the universal popularity of novels, Scott takes pains to distinguish *Emma* from the mass of such compositions. It proclaims, he declares, “a knowledge of the human heart, with the power and resolution to bring that knowledge to the service of honour and virtue,” unlike those “ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering-places and circulating libraries.” *Emma* belongs to a new type of fiction, “which has arisen almost in our own times, and which draws the characters and incidents introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life than was permitted by the former rules of the novel” (59).

It is to these “former rules” that Scott turns his attention in the next part of his review, in which *Emma* disappears from sight. In its beginnings, Scott contends, the novel “remained fettered by many peculiarities derived from the original style of romantic fiction” (59). Although distinct from the romance in being set in modern times, the early novel still featured a series of extraordinary incidents, aptly termed “dread contingencies” by Scott (60). Scott also notes that in the early novel, but not in real life, “all the more interesting individuals of the dramatis personae have their appropriate share in the action and in bringing about the catastrophe.” Moreover, the early novel “professed to give an imitation of nature, but it was, as the French say, *la belle nature*” (61). Within the last twenty years, however, a new style of novel has emerged, “neither alarming our credulity nor amusing our imagination by wild variety of incident, or by ... pictures of romantic affection and sensibility.” Striking a Wordsworthian note, Scott contends that this new generation of novelists is skilled in “copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid

scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him." Scott also observes astutely that these novelists take a greater risk of displeasing readers than their predecessors, since "he who paints a scene of common occurrence, places his composition within that extensive range of criticism which general experience offers to every reader" (63).

At this point in the essay, Austen reappears. Despite his earlier references to a new type of novel arising within the last twenty years, Scott now suggests that Austen "stands almost alone." Maria Edgeworth's novels, in contrast, "are laid in higher life, varied by more romantic incident, and by her remarkable power of embodying and illustrating national character." Austen, however, "confines herself chiefly to the middling classes of society; her most distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies; and those which are sketched with most originality and precision, belong to a class rather below that standard" (64). These observations on the social rank of Austen's characters are intriguing. By "middling classes of society," Scott seems to be pointing to characters such as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma herself: all surely among Austen's richest and most memorable creations.

Before beginning his analysis of *Emma*, Scott devotes a paragraph each to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. *Mansfield Park* is conspicuous by its absence, but the omission is understandable; it had received no notices at all in the review journals, unlike its predecessors, and it is not mentioned on the title page of *Emma*, which is ascribed to "the author of 'Pride and Prejudice,' &c. &c." (Another sign of the relative obscurity of *Mansfield Park* is that the second edition, of which 750 copies were issued in February 1816, shortly after Scott had submitted his review, sold poorly: after five years only 252 copies had been bought, and the remaining five hundred had to be remaindered at a fraction of the original cost.)¹¹ Of *Sense and Sensibility* Scott contends that "the interest and merit of the piece depend altogether upon the behaviour of the elder sister, while obliged at once to sustain her own disappointment with fortitude, and to support her sister, who abandons herself, with unsuppressed feelings, to the indulgence of grief" (64). Clearly at odds with recent feminist readings of *Sense and Sensibility* which place Marianne at the centre of the novel and are much less sympathetic than Scott towards Elinor, this analysis is concise and provocative. Equally contentious is Scott's observation that Elizabeth Bennet, after rejecting Darcy's offer of marriage, "does not perceive that she has done a foolish thing until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer" (65).

In turning to *Emma*, Scott observes that it has "even less story than either of the preceding novels" (65). The remark seems odd, considering the novel's intricately crafted plot, but by "story" Scott clearly means dramatic life-and-death events, the stuff of his own novels. We read *Emma*, Scott contends, "with pleasure, if not with deep interest," and "might more willingly resume [it] than one of those narratives where the attention is strongly riveted, during the first perusal, by the powerful excitement of curiosity" (67). The phrase "if not with deep interest" strikes a critical note, and others are to follow. A weakness of *Emma*, Scott argues, derives from the "minute detail" with which Austen depicts her characters. Thus examples of "folly or simplicity," such as Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates, are "apt to become as tiresome in fiction as in real society" (68). Scott illustrates his point with a four-page quotation from chapter twelve of *Emma* – the only long quotation in the essay – in which Mr. Woodhouse discusses with his daughter Isabella his anxieties for his own and everyone else's health. Two other reviewers echoed Scott's objections to Miss Bates: the *Augustan Review* complained that she was "somewhat too loquacious and too tautologous for our patience," while the *British Lady's Magazine* objected that this "weak gabbling country spinster ... talks infinitely too much, or, rather, fills infinitely too many pages."¹² Here Scott and his contemporaries are clearly at odds with modern critics, who prize Austen's depletion of these characters and their counterparts in the other novels, such as John Thorpe and Mr. Collins.

Another criticism, concerning Austen's depletion of love, concludes Scott's review. The "youth of this realm," he declares, "need not at present be taught the doctrine of selfishness." Authors of moral fiction, such as Austen, should be aware that in associating love with prudence "they may sometimes lend their aid to substitute more mean, more sordid, and more selfish motives of conduct, for the romantic feelings which their predecessors perhaps fanned into too powerful a flame" (68). Here Scott anticipates later criticism directed at the lack of passion in Austen's novels. Charlotte Brontë, in particular, was to echo his complaint in a letter on *Emma* of 1850. Austen, she declared, "ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound; the Passions are perfectly unknown to her ... her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet."¹³

Unlike Brontë, however, whose condemnation is unambiguous, Scott is at least half attracted to what he perceives as Austen's concern with manners rather than affairs of the heart. When Brontë writes that Austen "does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well," she is clearly unimpressed; for Scott, in contrast, Austen's delineation of surfaces is fascinating. Lacking, as John Halperin has observed, the critical term "realism," first employed to describe fidelity of representation only in the 1850s,¹⁴ Scott strove to find a way of characterising Austen's attention to minute detail. Following the example of sister arts comparisons by Horace, Sidney and many other critics, he did so by comparing her writing to paintings: in this case to the Flemish school of painting, whose subjects, he declares, "are not often elegant, and certainly never grand," but whose works are "finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader" (67).

The comparison resembles, as has often been noted, Austen's depletion of the "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour" (*Letters*, 469): a remark made in a letter to her nephew Edward a year after Scott wrote his review. But whereas Austen's metaphor is a piece of ironic self-deprecation, Scott's comparison with the Flemish school of painting associates her with a style of painting formerly disparaged by neoclassical critics such as Reynolds and Walpole but in the early nineteenth century gradually coming into critical favour. Scott is referring to such seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch painters as David Teniers, Nicolaes Maes, and Pieter de Hooch, who lovingly recorded small details of everyday life. Focusing on the domestic and the interior, their paintings were inward-looking and limited in scope, in contrast to the broad-scale, heroic world of history

painting. In a later essay on Defoe, first published in 1827, Scott expanded his views on Flemish painters. He does not bestow on them the unstinted admiration of George Eliot, who in *Adam Bede* (1859) writes of finding a “source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence.”¹⁵ But he does consider the special source of pleasure afforded “when the power of exact and circumstantial delineation is applied to objects which we are anxiously desirous to see in their proper shape and colours.”¹⁶

In his review of *Emma*, however, Scott’s use of the Flemish painting analogy is designed to point to Austen’s weaknesses as much as to her strengths. In the penultimate paragraph of his essay, surveying her “merits and faults,” Scott first commends Austen’s “quiet yet comic dialogue, in which the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect.” This is, perhaps, the most telling sentence in the review; “evolve themselves” is a splendid phrase, evoking precisely Austen’s gift for allowing her characters to reveal themselves through dialogue, without the intervention of an officious narrator. Scott then returns to his comparison with the Flemish painters, arguing that Austen’s fiction “bears the same relation to that of the sentimental and romantic cast, that cornfields and cottages and meadows bear to the highly adorned grounds of a show mansion, or the rugged sublimities of a mountain landscape” (68). With commendable disinterestedness, Scott has up to now said all he can in favour of a type of fiction so clearly antithetical to his own. At this point, however, his preferences, affected of course by his own practice, perhaps unwittingly emerge.

For a Romantic critic, understandably, the “rugged sublimities of a mountain landscape” were of greater intrinsic interest than “cornfields and cottages and meadows.” Jane Austen, however, whose attitude towards “rugged sublimities” is suggested by her treatment of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, took a very different view from Scott of the attractions of romantic fiction. Just after reading his review, she wrote her delightful letter (dated April 1) to James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent’s librarian, in response to his request for “an historical romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg.” “I could,” she tells Clarke, “no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life No, I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way” (*Letters*, 452-53).

On the same day Austen wrote to John Murray, returning a copy of the *Quarterly Review* that he had lent her and commenting on Scott’s essay. “The Authoress of ‘Emma’, she declared, “has no reason, I think, to complain of her treatment in it, except in the total omission of ‘Mansfield Park.’ I cannot but be sorry that so clever a man as the Reviewer of ‘Emma’ should consider it as unworthy of being noticed” (*Letters*, 453). These remarks, like so much else in Austen’s letters, deserve careful attention. What does Austen mean by her comment on “so clever a man as the Reviewer,” and how just is her complaint about the omission of *Mansfield Park*? Margaret Kirkham, in her *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1983), devotes a highly critical chapter to Scott’s review of *Emma*. She asserts that “there is little doubt that Jane Austen knew that it was Scott who had reviewed *Emma*,” and believes that her letter to Murray displays “disillusionment with the way in which her work had been treated.”¹⁷ There is, however, no reason to suppose that Austen had uncovered Scott’s identity. She had, it is true, correctly guessed at his authorship of *Waverley*, but this was common literary gossip; no such speculation about the review had taken place. As for disillusionment, this is confined in the letter to the omission of *Mansfield Park*, an omission that could well have been due to Scott’s ignorance of its existence, rather than, as Austen assumed, to a conscious decision that it was “unworthy of being noticed.” There is a good deal of satisfaction in Austen’s quiet phrase, “no reason, I think, to complain.” She would not, of course, express immoderate gratitude to her own publisher, whom she had earlier described in a letter to Cassandra as “a rogue of course, but a civil one” (*Letters*, 425).

Nonetheless, the long review in the *Quarterly* had, as she must have known, at last brought her work into national and even international prominence. By 1816 the *Quarterly* had some twelve thousand subscribers, as against the fewer than fifteen hundred copies of *Emma* that were sold before the novel was remaindered in 1820.¹⁸ David Gilson suggests plausibly that the review might have provided the impetus for an edition of *Emma* published in Philadelphia in 1816: the only American edition of any of Austen’s novels before the six were published as a set in Philadelphia in 1832-33.¹⁹ It is also possible that in writing the debate between Captain Harville and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* on the respective strengths of men’s and women’s constancy in love, Austen was taking into account the objections of her male reviewer in the *Quarterly* to her characters’ excessive prudence and lack of romantic passion. Austen read the review at the end of March 1816, more than four months before completing *Persuasion* in early August.

After Austen’s authorship of *Emma* and the other novels was revealed by Henry Austen in 1818, Scott made several other references to her work, repeatedly using sister arts comparisons to establish his point. In a letter to Joanna Baillie of 1822, he observes that Austen’s novels “have a great deal of nature in them – nature in ordinary and middle life to be sure but valuable from its strong resemblance and correct drawing.” Here the same ambiguous attitude to Austen’s fidelity to life is seen as in the review. Some later *obiter dicta*, however, are less constrained in their praise. By far the best known is a journal entry on *Pride and Prejudice*, which Scott read “for the third time at least” in 1826:

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!

Other remarks in Scott’s journals and critical essays pursue this contrast between his own special talent for the “Big Bow-wow strain” and Austen’s capacity for scrutinizing the smallest details of domestic life. In 1827, Scott noted in his journal, he “whiled away the evening over one of Miss Austen’s novels. There is a truth of painting in her writings which always delights me. They do not, it is true, get above the middle classes of society, but there she is inimitable.” Still more positively, in a conversation of 1831 recorded by J.G. Lockhart, Scott remarked: “There’s a finishing-off in some of her scenes that is really quite above every body else.”²⁰ And in February 1832, only a few months before his death, Scott observed in a preface to his novel *St Ronan’s Well* that in this unusual attempt at writing domestic fiction he had no “hope of rivaling ... the brilliant and talented names of Edgeworth, Austen, Charlotte Smith, and others, whose success seems to

have appropriated this province of the novel as exclusively their own.”²¹

These casual remarks were soon in print, and affected Austen’s critical reputation as much as Scott’s formal review. Surprisingly, the review seems never to have been reprinted as the preface to an edition of *Emma*, as was the case, for example, with Scott’s 1811 essay on *The Castle of Otranto*, reprinted in numerous subsequent editions of Walpole’s novel. The review was also accidentally omitted from the first collected edition of Scott’s nonfictional prose, the *Miscellaneous Prose Works* of 1827, in which another *Quarterly Review* essay on Austen by Richard Whately was printed in error.²² Scott’s essay was, however, included in many later editions of the *Miscellaneous Prose Works*, in other compilations of his writings, and in collections of nineteenth-century essays.²³ The first critic to make extensive use of Scott’s review was Whately, whose essay of 1821 contains several ideas and phrases, including an analogy with “Flemish painting,” taken from his predecessor.²⁴ In 1852, an anonymous reviewer in the *New Monthly Magazine* quoted from both Scott’s review of *Emma* and his journal entry on the “Big Bow-wow strain,” which had first been printed in Lockhart’s *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1837). G.H. Lewes also quoted from the review and the journal entry in a major essay on Austen of 1859. Of the journal entry he writes that “high as the praise is, it is as much below the real excellence of Miss Austen, as the ‘big bow-wow strain’ is below the incomparable power of the *Waverley Novels*. Scott felt, but did not define, the excellence of Miss Austen.”²⁵ This essay marks a turning-point in the history of Austen’s critical reception: no previous reader of Scott’s review of *Emma* or the journal entries had criticized him for undervaluing his contemporary.

More commonly, however, Victorian critics simply cited Scott’s remarks to give weight to their own praise of Austen. Thus Julia Kavanagh in 1862 and an anonymous critic of 1866 quote from Scott and Macaulay as authorities while they adumbrate the merits of Austen’s novels.²⁶ Scott’s letter to Joanna Baillie on Austen’s “correct drawing” of nature was quoted in *The Book of Authors* (1869), a popular compilation of critical views.²⁷ In his *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), which provided a wealth of new information on the author and revitalised interest in her novels, James Edward Austen-Leigh concludes an imposing list entitled “Opinions expressed by eminent persons” with Scott’s “Big Bow-wow strain” journal entry, adding that “the well-worn condition of Scott’s own copy of [Austen’s] works attests that they were much read in his family.” Interestingly, however, Austen-Leigh seems to have been unaware of Scott’s authorship of the review of *Emma*, which he contrasts unfavourably with Whately’s later essay. He objects to Scott’s assessment of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and criticizes his negative remarks on Austen’s depletion of foolish characters such as Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates.²⁸

In our time, Scott’s review has been partially reprinted in student guides to *Emma* such as David Lodge’s *Casebook* (1968) and the Norton Critical Edition (1972).²⁹ Modern critics, of course, are apt to find Scott’s response to Austen inadequate. In his preface to the Norton edition, Stephen Parrish declares, with some condescension, that “while Scott’s appreciation of *Emma* was admirable, it should be plain that in the following century and a half our understanding of Jane Austen’s art has grown and deepened.”³⁰ Margaret Kirkham, the most implacable critic of Scott’s essay, writes of his “trivialising remarks,” which are “likely to provoke a smile.”³¹ In the face of such revisionist comments, it should be noted that no major British novelist before Scott had devoted an essay of comparable length and penetration to a major novel-writing contemporary. And however dizzying the heights that modern insights into Austen have reached, as witnessed by the titles of such articles as “*Emmagrammatology*” and “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,”³² we should not judge too harshly the early nineteenth-century author who wrote at length on Austen’s novels without knowing so much as her name, and who strove to find a critical vocabulary capable of describing her ever indefinable achievement.

NOTES

- ¹ *Jane Austen’s Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 404. All further references to Austen’s letters are to this edition.
- ² *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969): *Sense and Sensibility*, 47, 92; *Mansfield Park*, 86, 281; *Persuasion*, 100, 107, 167; *Sanditon* (in *Minor Works*), 397. All further references to Austen’s novels are to this edition.
- ³ See Hill Shine and Helen Chadwick Shine, *The Quarterly Review Under Gifford: Identification of Contributors 1809-1824* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949).
- ⁴ Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray* (London: Murray, 1891), 282, 288, 289.
- ⁵ Scott: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Routledge, 1970), 83.
- ⁶ *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge, 1968), 58. All further references to Scott’s review are to this edition.
- ⁷ *Austen: Critical Heritage*, ed. Southam, 35, 41, 71, 72.

- ⁸ William S. Ward, "Three Hitherto Unnoted Contemporary Reviews of Jane Austen," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 26, (1971-72), 471, 476.
- ⁹ *Scott: Critical Heritage*, ed. Hayden, 104.
- ¹⁰ See Margaret Ball, *Sir Walter Scott as a Critic of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), and Ioan Williams, ed., *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1968).
- ¹¹ See David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 60.
- ¹² Ward, "Contemporary Reviews," 475, 477.
- ¹³ *Austen: Critical Heritage*, ed. Southam, 128.
- ¹⁴ Halperin, "Jane Austen's Nineteenth-Century Critics: Walter Scott to Henry James," in Halperin, ed., *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11. Although Halperin suggests that the term was first "imported from France in the 1840s," the earliest example in *OED* is from 1856.
- ¹⁵ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), ch. 17, p. 223.
- ¹⁶ *Scott on Novelists*, ed. Williams, 179.
- ¹⁷ Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983), 76, 77.
- ¹⁸ See John O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers 1802-1824* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 27; and Gilson, *Bibliography*, 69.
- ¹⁹ *Emma* also appeared in a French translation in 1816, and was even mentioned in a Russian journal in that year. See Gilson, *Bibliography*, 100. 70-72.
- ²⁰ Southam collects these excerpts from Scott's letters and journals in *Austen: Critical Heritage*, 106.
- ²¹ *Scott on Novelists*, ed. Williams, 428.
- ²² See Charles Beecher Hogan, "Sir Walter Scott and *Emma*," *PMLA*, 45 (1930), 1264-66, responding to William Reitzel, "Sir Walter Scott's Review of Jane Austen's *Emma*," *PMLA*, 43 (1928), 487-93. Hogan refutes Reitzel's attempt to ascribe Scott's review to Whately.
- ²³ Some of these reprints are listed in Gilson, *Bibliography*, 70.
- ²⁴ See Reitzel, "Scott's Review," 490-92; and Walter Graham, "Scott and Mr. Reitzel," *PMLA*, 44 (1929), 309.
- ²⁵ *Austen: Critical Heritage*, ed. Southam, 135, 156-57, 161.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195, 201-02.
- ²⁷ *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, 1870-1940, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge, 1987), 159.
- ²⁸ Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: Richard Bentley, 1870), 190-91, 174-76.
- ²⁹ Lodge, ed., *Jane Austen, Emma: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 37-45; Steven M. Parrish, ed., *Emma* (New York: Norton, 1972), 367-69.
- ³⁰ Parrish, ed., *Emma*, ix.
- ³¹ Kirkham, *Feminism and Fiction*, 162, 138.
- ³² Grant I. Holly, "Emmagrammatology," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 19 (1989), 39-51; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 818-37.



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