

The Practice of Reading: Austen as Guide

Reading in its highest sense—not merely an amusement of the moment, which leaves no results except a craving for more dissipation of the same sort, but that which informs and elevates the mind while drawing out its fullest powers—this kind of reading is one of our purest enjoyments; and to make the most of it we must look carefully over the field spread out before us, and see how we can cultivate it to the best advantage.¹

Reading must be cultivated “to the best advantage.” For the Victorians, that best advantage often evoked tensions between individual improvement and the reinforcement of traditional class and gender hierarchies. This chapter approaches the topic of Victorian reading practices by focusing on the cultivation of the individual reader through the critical and prose accounts of fiction that attempted to sort out the increasingly complex Victorian literary world: Victorian reading guides. Looking at Jane Austen’s treatment in these texts reveals how the Victorians framed discussions about the history and development of the novel, the hierarchy of texts, the rights and responsibilities of English readers, and the links between reading and education. By “education,” I refer to the reflective practice of self-education and self-improvement; the education received through formal study; and the broad acquisition of knowledge. The Victorian reading guides studied in this chapter address, and often conflate, these aspects of education, bringing them all under the umbrella of good reading practices, and presenting novels as both an inspiration for and a challenge to the development of effective reading

habits. Following Jane Austen through Victorian reading guides is a useful way to study the guides themselves, identifying their common elements and exploring their different approaches to literature and history. At the same time, in their arguments about education and literacy, these texts participate in the Victorian creation of Austen as heroine, using her authorship as part of a broader attempt to create a mainstream narrative about literature, canon formation, and the value of novels. In doing so, they attempt to shape the tastes of the individual reader, promote the morality of Austen's texts, and underscore her appreciation among leading male intellectuals and writers.

As Elizabeth Kirkland suggests in the above quotation from *A Short History of English Literature for Young People* (1892), reading is transformative; it can shape an individual's way of seeing the world while also providing pleasure and edification. The ability to read in this way, however, is not innate; thus, Victorian reading guides sought to teach and foster good reading practices. Offering guidance on reading was part of a broader project of educating the citizenry and creating a sense of investment in a shared national literary heritage—an undertaking that became increasingly crucial as literacy reached near-universal rates at the end of the nineteenth century. As Richard Altick explains in “The Reading Public in England and America in 1900,” “it was naive to have expected the newly literate to emerge with highly developed critical standards. To some extent, at least, public taste is formed by the quality of the material that is most readily available or most persuasively offered” (1989, 229). Because the material that was most available and persuasive during the middle of the nineteenth century included penny dreadfuls, sensation novels, and other texts that were not generally considered to be the most “literary” fiction, common readers were thought to require guidance on selecting texts. In the process of educating their readers, then, the Victorian reading guides that proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century also participated in early acts of canon formation and the determination of literary value. The work of these reading guides is relevant for the study of the novel, in particular, because by the mid-1800s the history and corpus of the genre had become substantial enough to provide numerous and varied opportunities for the evaluation, categorization, and organization of texts. Thus, Victorian reading guides helped to initiate conversations that would evolve into debates about anthologizing texts, creating a canon, and assigning literary value.

Jane Austen's influence on the Victorian heroine played out across a range of fictional, critical, and biographical texts, and Victorian reading guides contributed to the conversation by explaining who should read Jane Austen and why. Specifically, they present Austen as both an arbiter of feminine morality and the darling of intellectual men, whose patronage underscores her importance. Victorian reading guides demonstrate the permeation of Jane Austen throughout the literary marketplace and reflect some of the major narratives that were emerging about Austen, her novels, and their place on the Victorian reader's bookshelf. Moreover, the guides illustrate the various ways in which the Victorians began to articulate and institutionalize theories and practices about the function of reading, specifically novel reading. Looking at the representation of Austen and her novels in these works enables conversations across the guides, highlighting their different methods and agendas. Such an approach also calls attention to how reading guides reflected attitudes about the ongoing development of the novel as well as the fiction of previous generations. Speaking broadly about historical works published by the Victorians, Elisabeth Jay notes "Those who commissioned, wrote, or published literary histories of the eighteenth century in the Victorian period were well aware that these books and articles would be read as much for their attitude toward contemporary issues as for any information they might yield about their literary forebears" (2004, 98). Reading guides are significant, in part, because they convey details about the literature of the eighteenth century as well as Victorian attitudes toward that literature—and by extension the literature of their own period. Studying Austen's presence in these Victorian reading guides, then, not only reflects back onto her novels by calling attention to her reputation and what many Victorian writers saw as the edifying potential of her texts but also reveals the emergence of a set of standards that Victorian writers and their successors would use to evaluate fiction for decades to come.

*"I AM DELIGHTED WITH THE BOOK! I SHOULD LIKE TO SPEND MY
WHOLE LIFE IN READING IT"*²

The need to articulate guidelines for developing good reading habits and provide suggestions about what to read was not unique to the Victorians; indeed, such subject matter was commonly found in the conduct books, educational treatises, and religious tracts of earlier centuries. Late eighteenth-century cultural attitudes toward reading, Jane Austen's

own reading habits, and the reading practices of characters in her novels have been the subject of numerous insightful and engaging studies: Katie Halsey's work with the Reading Experience Database considers the responses of "everyday readers" to Austen's novels; Olivia Murphy contextualizes Austen's novels in the field of early literary criticism, with particular attention to the periodical press; Alan Richardson looks at late eighteenth-century reading practices and Austen's participation in these practices; Jacqueline Pearson considers the implications of such reading practices for women; Kathryn Sutherland takes a bibliographic approach to the history of Austen's "textual lives"; and Devoney Looser traces the early critical fortunes of one novel—*Pride and Prejudice*—to determine how it became *the* representative text in the Austen canon.³ Building on the work of these critics and many others, I begin by looking briefly at a few moments of reading in Jane Austen's novels that speak to the importance of reading for a heroine and perhaps inspired Victorian reading guides' arguments about the importance of reading Jane Austen.

Jane Austen engages questions about the power and responsibility of the reader across all of her novels and connects reading to education, frequently drawing parallels between good reading habits and other forms of social and personal responsibility. Indeed, D. D. Devlin sees this as a major component of Austen's works, noting "all Jane Austen's novels, and many of her minor works, unfinished pieces and juvenilia are about education.... Education, for the heroines, is a process through which they come to see clearly themselves and their conduct, and by this new vision or insight become better people" (1975, 1). Part of that process involves reading, and Austen is often quite specific about the reading practices of her characters. For instance, critics interested in Austen's attitude toward reading have frequently discussed the function of gothic fiction and the education of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, yet Austen also investigates reading and education in other ways that would surely have resonated with the Victorians.

Like Victorian reading guides, the reading practices depicted in Austen's *Emma* engage questions of self-improvement and reflect the impulse to categorize and organize texts. Austen depicts numerous direct and indirect acts of reading in *Emma* and suggests that it is important for a heroine to be an avid and informed reader of texts, situations, and people. The connection between reading and education during the nineteenth century was strongly tied to class, and reading and literacy could be a means of both demonstrating and elevating one's social position. As Richard Altick points out in his

discussion of working-class readers, “we must not underestimate the number whose intellectual curiosity and emotional and spiritual needs were too resistant to be frustrated by the limited accessibility of good books, the lack of leisure, and the absence of systematic guidance” (1998, 240). Regardless of class and accessibility to texts, true readers, Altick suggests, persevere against the odds in the pursuit of knowledge. Although few of Austen’s fictional readers belong to the working classes as described by Altick, she does connect reading to social position, and in *Emma*, an individual’s reading habits and abilities become a standard for judging his or her character. Reading guides, too, realized the potential for social mobility offered by education and frequently addressed themselves to upwardly-mobile readers. Most Victorian reading guides do not engage with specific scenes of reading in Austen’s novels; however, I discuss a few key moments from *Emma* here to demonstrate how Austen used her heroine to engage questions about reading and self-education—questions that her own novels would later help frame for the authors of Victorian reading guides.

Early in their friendship, Harriet Smith confides in Emma about her attraction to Robert Martin, prompting Emma to ask, “Mr. Martin, I suppose, is not a man of information beyond the line of his own business. He does not read?” (*E* 22). Here, Emma degrades Robert’s reading habits by suggesting that “reading” involves intellectual and imaginative engagement and the elevation of the mind as opposed to the practical acquisition of “information” gleaned from trade publications. Although Emma presents this as a question, she frames her inquiry in a way that suggests she already knows the answer. Rather than asking “Does he read?” or “What does he read?” she offers a statement, “He does not read,” in the form of a question, so as to force Harriet to confirm Emma’s preconceived idea or risk offending her friend with a contradiction. As a result, Harriet stumbles:

Oh, yes!—that is, no—I do not know—but I believe he has read a good deal—but not what you would think any thing of. He reads the Agricultural Reports and some other books, that lay in one of the window seats—but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the Elegant Extracts—very entertaining. And I know he has read the Vicar of Wakefield. He never read the Romance of the Forest, nor the Children of the Abbey. He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them, but he is determined to get them now as soon as ever he can. (22)

Flustered by her friend's question/accusation about her love interest, Harriet initially confirms Emma's suspicions that Robert reads only material related to farming. However, she then moves to an account of his reading that suggests more diverse interests; Robert reads aloud to entertain his family members, and he also reads novels. Robert's discerning reading habits are revealed by Harriet's assertion that he has read Oliver Goldsmith's celebrated 1766 novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* but not the popular gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe or Anna Maria Roche. The demands of Robert's profession as a tenant farmer on Mr. Knightley's estate do not leave him much time for leisure reading; nonetheless, he is able to make time for reading novels, choosing his subject matter judiciously and even reading aloud to his mother and sisters. Indeed, Robert's commitment to reading outside the scope of his profession reflects early nineteenth-century advice about self-education. For instance, the 1813 conduct book *The Young Gentleman and Lady's Monitor* notes, (quoting Joseph Addison in *The Guardian*, 1713), "A superior capacity for business, and a more extensive knowledge, are the steps by which a new man often mounts to favor, and outshines his contemporaries" (Moore 1813, 2). It is the combined "capacity for business" (professional reading) and "extensive knowledge" (leisure reading) that demonstrate Robert's capabilities, which are frequently praised by Mr. Knightley, who describes him as an "excellent young man" and "a respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer" (Austen *E*, 44, 45). Thus, although Harriet's defense of Robert is tempered by her awe for Emma, it does effectively represent the wide range of Robert's reading habits and show him to be in line with contemporary ideas regarding good practices for self-education and self-improvement.

Emma, of course, conveniently overlooks the positive elements of Harriet's comments, focusing instead on how Robert has forgotten to purchase a copy of *The Romance of the Forest*, which Harriet had recommended. This maneuver, in which she frames the scenario to cast Robert in a negative light, is characteristic of Emma who often creates narratives to suit her own preconceived notions. Later in the novel, upon finding Robert's letter of proposal to be more articulate than she expected, Emma does not acknowledge his superior literacy but instead assumes that one of his sisters helped Robert write the letter: "I think one of his sisters must have helped him. I can hardly imagine the young man whom I saw talking with you the other day could express himself so well, if left quite to his own powers" (37). Although this assertion is preceded by a substantial paragraph in which Emma reflects internally on the high quality

of the letter, she is vehement in her outward condemnation of it. In this moment, Emma builds on her earlier criticism of Robert in which she cites his neglect to obtain a copy of *The Romance of the Forest* as evidence of his disregard for Harriet: “How much his business engrosses him already, is very plain from the circumstance of his forgetting to inquire for the book you recommended... What has he to do with books? And I have no doubt that he *will* thrive and be a very rich man in time—and his being illiterate and coarse need not disturb us” (26). Here, Emma jumps to some rather remarkable conclusions. She refuses to acknowledge that inquiring after a novel might be easily overlooked when one is traveling for business purposes; instead, she hastens to conclude that Robert has no interest in books or reading beyond his business pursuits—an assumption that directly contradicts Harriet’s earlier assertion about Robert’s reading habits. For Emma, Robert must be “illiterate and coarse” because her limited worldview and strict sense of class demarcations make it impossible for her to reconcile Robert’s more genteel pursuits, such as reading literature, with his status as a tenant farmer. This perspective on Robert both speaks to Emma’s class snobbery and reveals her own anxieties about reading. If a busy tenant farmer, like Robert Martin, can find time to read for useful business purposes, the pleasure of his family, and his own individual edification, how can Emma possibly justify her own dilettantism?

The lax nature of Emma’s education is apparent from the very start of the novel in which Miss Taylor is described as primarily a friend and substitute mother rather than a governess, and Emma is described as “doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own” (5). Due, in part, to a lack of firm guidance, Emma has developed reading habits that are not particularly steady, focused, or purposeful. She makes elaborate reading lists in the name of self-improvement, yet she is not inclined to follow through on these plans. As Mr. Knightley attests,

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very neatly arranged— sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. (28)

Taking her cue from the advice manuals that often prescribed courses of “improving” reading, Emma creates a list that seems to prefigure Victorian reading guides in that it is intentionally organized and reflects a discerning literary taste and desire for self-improvement. It is the capacity to follow through and not become distracted, however, that Emma lacks.

Emma’s good intentions resurface when her friendship with Harriet prompts her to undertake a new course of study. Nonetheless, Mr. Knightley’s earlier skepticism is validated when Austen’s narrator reveals, “Her views of improving her little friend’s mind, by a great deal of useful reading and conversation, had never yet led to more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on to-morrow. It was much easier to chat than to study” (51). Here, Austen seems to imply a connection between improving reading and Emma’s potentially dangerous imaginings and gossip—gossip that could have ultimately compromised the reputations and futures of several Highbury inhabitants—and asks readers to consider if a regular course of study might have kept Emma’s imagination in check.

Emma’s book lists become part of the novel’s broader argument about the importance of being a good reader of texts, situations, and people. While the interpersonal situations resolve themselves by the novel’s close, the argument that promotes Robert Martin’s reading practices over Emma’s still stands, reminding readers that self-improvement is not only the task of the working classes but is essential for everyone. The book lists in *Emma* also provide a useful framework for understanding Victorian readers and their ideas about education because the lists demonstrate the importance of categorizing books and assigning value to reading material. Emma’s lists are designed for a course of “regular” and “useful” reading, which would exclude the Minerva Press novels enjoyed by Harriet but include Robert Martin’s choice, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Indeed, considering the class implications of the characters’ reading in this way demonstrates that Robert Martin is on an upward trajectory while Emma, although firmly established in her class position by both her own family heritage and her marriage, runs the risk of growing stagnant. Austen hints at this potential in her depiction of Emma’s contentious relationships with those characters whose class status is either evolving or undefined, such as the upwardly mobile Cole family and the inscrutable Jane Fairfax. Although Emma’s economic position is secure, a course of “improving reading” might be necessary for this heroine to maintain both relevance and social leadership within Highbury.

During Austen's lifetime, conduct books advised that women read novels in moderation or not at all. For instance, John Burton's *Lectures of Female Education and Manners* (1797) advises, "Reading must be unprofitable, which is confined to Novels; and this, I am apprehensive, is too much the case with your Sex" (164). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the genre of the novel had become so prolific and varied, that writers on education were tasked with creating categories and defining literary value in ways that would help them to shape the reading habits of the next generation and institutionalize and formalize the study of literature. Victorian reading guides emerged, then, as texts that could lead readers through the maze of the literary marketplace and help set them on a course of self-education, and Jane Austen frequently appeared in these guides as an example of the kind of reading that could bolster one's intellectual and moral habits of mind.

*"PARDON ME FOR NEGLECTING TO PROFIT BY YOUR ADVICE,
WHICH ON EVERY OTHER SUBJECT SHALL
BE MY CONSTANT GUIDE"*⁴

Victorian reading guides are not necessarily aesthetic works themselves, however, by offering value judgments and critical lenses for reading literature, they helped to determine how aesthetic works would influence later generations. Hans Jauss argues that influence is an essential component of literary history: "the historical essence of the work of art lies not only in its representational or expressive function but also in its influence" (1982, 15). He continues, pointing out that such influence is best understood when works are placed in relation to one another and in relation to the audience. As discussed further in Chaps. 3 and 4, Victorian novelists both directly and indirectly incorporated Jane Austen into their texts, extending her textual and cultural influence well into the nineteenth century. Victorian reading guides make these relationships and patterns of influence visible, setting out categories and criteria for the study of literary texts, bringing those texts into conversation with one another, and acknowledging that readers bring a range of purposes and motivations to the texts they are studying.

Victorian reading guides vary in their scope and approach to influencing readers. Some of the texts function as nineteenth-century versions of Cliffs Notes, providing plot summaries for the busy reader who does not

have time to complete an entire novel; some are briefly annotated lists, more interested in creating categories and contextualizing with chronology than the substance of the texts themselves; some blend literary history and biography, presenting the author's life as equally important to her or his works; and some bear a resemblance to contemporary critical studies, tracing themes and techniques across the works of several carefully selected writers. The work's approach and focus is often belied by its title. A number of texts focused on self-education, such as *A Short Course in Literature, English and American* (1873) and *A Guide to the Study of Nineteenth Century Authors* (1890), others promoted the idea of essential knowledge and include *Library of the World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern, Essential Studies in English and American Literature* (1896) and *How to Form a Library* (1886). Some books immediately announced their value judgments: *Books Worth Reading; A Plea for the Best and an Essay Towards Selection, with Short Introductions to Many of the World's Great Authors* (1899), *The Great English Writers from Chaucer to George Eliot* (1889), and *The International Library of Famous Literature: Selections from the World's Great Writers, Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern, with Biographical and Explanatory Notes and with Introductions* (1898), while others emphasized the attractions of reading: *Pleasant Authors for Young Folks* (1884) and *The Reading of Books: Its Pleasures, Profits, and Perils* (1883). Whether their titles promised pleasure, basic education, or greater expertise, all of these works participated in the institutionalization of literature.

Although the government had assumed some responsibility for overseeing popular education since the 1839 formation of the Committee of the Council on Education, it was not until 1870 that the Education Act (also known as the Forster Act) established a national system of schools in England and made the government responsible for the systemization of education. Richard Altick points out that the 1870 Act "did not significantly hasten the spread of literacy," but he nonetheless acknowledges that it did contribute to the increasing institutionalization of education nationwide as well as the growth of literacy among working-class children (1998, 171). The institutionalization of education during the nineteenth century was directly tied to broader concerns about society, culture, and citizenship. For instance, in his discussion of the rise of Board Schools and the education of the working classes, Jonathan Rose writes, "While liberal reformers argued that a well-read proletariat would be more productive and law-abiding, conservatives pointed to the

threat of radical literature, and warned that penny dreadfuls were promoting juvenile crime” (2012, 35). Education, specifically literacy, was potentially problematic because it provided access to a range of texts and ideas that were previously inaccessible to large segments of the population. It also created community as a result of common reading experiences, which could foster potentially revolutionary ideas. Indeed, Rose notes that the individual desire for access to texts contributed heavily to the promotion of literacy: “the rise of literacy, then, was driven more by popular demand than by compulsory education, which was not universal before 1880” (33). Rose’s research suggests that the individual reader, as well as the establishment, was committed to increasing literacy among the English public during the nineteenth century, although their specific motivations may have differed.

In *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education*, Ian Hunter studies how the establishment promoted education and literacy, tracing the rise of English as a discipline and the rise of literary criticism as a field. In doing so, he explores “how literature came to be deployed as a privileged device within the apparatus of popular education; one focusing the supervisory strategy that permitted the government of the population to be realised through a tactic of ethical individualization” (1988, 42). Reading provided opportunities for discussions of aesthetics, morality, and character that could shape an individual’s view of his or her social and ethical obligations toward the broader community. Hunter notes that reading and literacy played a large role in a state-fueled educational imperative that was driven, in part, by a desire to shape good citizens: “the ethical function of popular education emerged not as an ideological supplement to its educative mission, but as an inescapable component of a pedagogical apparatus directed at forming the attributes of a population” (48). The ability to control or monitor an individual’s reading and access to texts, however, was a greater challenge. For instance, Hunter discusses how the radical politics of the Chartists both depended upon and deployed literacy to challenge the government and, by extension, broader concerns about culture and society. Nonetheless, amidst a series of governmental acts and the institutionalization of education, individual readers proved both resilient and independent, and the literary marketplace rapidly evolved to accommodate their needs.

As they explored the possibilities of their newly acquired literacy, individual readers were faced with an ever-expanding range of reading

material, and their motivations for reading became increasingly varied as the century progressed. During the 1870s, English Literature gained traction as a formal subject of study through its inclusion on several Civil Service examinations, and Jonathan Rose explains that “English literature was more firmly established in the curriculum after the 1882 Mundella Code, which mandated Shakespeare, Milton, ‘or some other standard author’ for Standard VII” (2012, 34). Although the study of literature, both ancient and modern, was being taught throughout the nineteenth century, there was a gap between the presence of English Literature on these examinations and its relative absence from the secondary school curriculum. As a result, according to Altick “students relied almost exclusively on the short manuals, outlines, and annotated texts published in ever larger quantities for the cram market” (1998, 185). Many of the reading guides discussed in this chapter fall into that category and provided students with the basic knowledge necessary to pass the exams; however, the market was also filled with texts for everyday readers who sought guidance about how to choose appropriate and useful reading material for pleasure or general self-improvement. Indeed, in his Preface to *Books Worth Reading* (1899), Victorian reading guide author Frank Raffety expresses his desire “to avoid the attitude of a teacher” and, instead, focus on sharing the experience of reading as a “congenial recreation” (vii). For authors of reading guides, however, this recreational reading still required structure. Growing demographics of readers, such as women and members of the working classes, were often targeted by the guides because these were the groups that were least likely to have had access to formal guidance in developing their reading habits. Upwardly mobile members of the middle classes, too, were courted by the authors of reading guides, who, as demonstrated below, played on anxieties about social and cultural literacies. Over the second half of the century, Victorian reading guides evolved to suit a range of readers whose motivations included preparation for exams, personal edification, and social mobility and whose interest in learning how and what to read created a market for these texts.

Reading guides stood at an intersection of education, society, and commerce, and literacy and literary reading was frequently associated with both self-improvement and political influence. In *Culture and Education*, Ian Hunter discusses the emergence of English as a discipline and literary criticism as a field and explores “how literature came to be deployed as a privileged device within the apparatus of popular education; one focusing the supervisory strategy that permitted the

government of the population to be realised through a tactic of ethical individualization” (1988, 42). The increasing access to literary works provided by reading guides facilitated and accelerated the spread of literacy and increased the number of readers that could engage with social and political movements through text. At the same time, however, the very commercialism upon which reading guides relied was at odds with broader literary enterprises. As Richard Altick points out, “In a world of mass readership, the literary establishment was at pains to uphold critical standards, to condemn not only the cynical greed of the commercial interests that provided the masses with their reading matter but also what seemed to them to irremediably crude tastes of working-class readers” (1989, 229). Thus, although reading guides were promoting a specific value system with regard to literary works, they were also dependent upon the same commercialization of texts that made a wide range of works—many of which the establishment perceived as having questionable literary value—available to readers.

One way that reading guides worked to engage their audiences was through a substantial Preface or Introduction in which the author/compiler laid out his or her agenda in creating the subsequent list of reading recommendations. These Prefaces demonstrate the increasing importance of the reader and the need for authors to engage with and even court the audiences for their texts. Moreover, the Prefaces reveal the increasing institutionalization of literature and the move toward identifying and creating categories for literary works—maneuvers that helped to lay the groundwork for contemporary critical practices. The Prefaces reveal some of the ways in which the Victorians contextualized and presented the study of literature and demonstrate how the expansion of the reading public prompted authors and publishers to articulate and promote mainstream ideas about what constituted good, improving reading practices. Despite their varied approaches, Victorian reading guides share a few major elements: they investigate the history of the novel, assign value and create a hierarchy of texts, and articulate the role of the reader. Jane Austen’s novels appear frequently in Victorian reading guides, which often used her texts to promote their own agendas by casting her as a champion of mainstream values. Examining this use reveals how the Victorians engaged Austen in discussions about literary history and readership and reflects some of the strategies employed by Victorian readers and writers for understanding the social and cultural functions of fiction during the nineteenth century.

Because the novel was a relatively young genre, tracing and solidifying its history was both appealing to and manageable for writers of Victorian reading guides who devoted time and attention to categorizing and organizing these works, thereby becoming active participants in conversations about periodization and literary history. For instance, in *A History of English Literature in a Series of Biographical Sketches* (1869), William Francis Collier takes a chronological approach to literary history, dividing it into nine “eras,” each of which features brief biographies of five to ten major writers as well as an overview of those writers whom Collier believes to be of secondary importance. Unsurprisingly, women writers appear only on the secondary lists, and Jane Austen sits alongside Maria Edgeworth and Frances Trollope on the list of “Other Writers of the Eighth Era” (1784–1832)—a period bracketed by the death of Johnson and the death of Scott. The emphasis on author biography was common among Victorian critics as they used historical authors to suit their own contemporary social agendas. In addition, the publication of new biographies often renewed interest in the author’s works, as was certainly the case with James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir*. In his *History*, Collier argues for the importance of biography to an historical understanding of literature, noting, “It has, accordingly, been my principal object to shew how the books, which we prize among the brightest of our national glories, have grown out of human lives—rooted oftener, perhaps, in sorrow than in joy; and how the scenery and the society, amid which an author played out his fleeting part, have left indelible hues upon the pages that he wrote” (ii). Collier suggests that understanding biography can lead to a greater appreciation of a literary work, and his interest in biography also contributes to a broader understanding of history by calling attention to the contexts in which the literary works were produced. Literary works, Collier explains, are among those “national glories” that contribute to the greatness of England; thus, they must be both preserved and appreciated, and Collier’s text actively participates in reproducing a nationalist ideology by promoting the preservation and appreciation of such works. The spirit of nationalism, Collier suggests, is embodied in the authors who produced this great literature, and his text’s focus on biography provides an example of the ideology underlying the elevation of a writer such as Jane Austen to the status of heroine. Indeed, Collier, like many critics from this period, glorified the author and expressed a reverence for biography that would persist for nearly a century before later critics, such as Roland Barthes, would declare the author to be dead.

In the process of directing an individual's reading, reading guides—consciously or unconsciously—assign value to literary texts. Rita Felski points out the connection between readership and value, noting “any attempt to clarify the value of literature must surely engage the diverse motives of readers and ponder the mysterious event of reading” (2008, 11). This attention to readership underscores the subjective and individualized nature of literary value, which reading guides attempted to standardize by offering some lenses through which untrained readers could approach texts. The approaches to texts and reading articulated in Victorian reading guides are often in line with the texts' broader aims of producing an educated citizenry, fully steeped in the greatness of England's past and prepared to shape its future. To that end, they are often quite direct about their value judgments. For example, Collier explains: “The method of the entire book aims at enabling a student to perceive at a glance the relative importance of certain authors, so that his reading may be either confined to the lives of our great Classics, or extended through the full range of our Literature, without much risk of confusion or mistake as to proportionate greatness” (1869, iii). From its very start, this text uses language of value to assure readers that each of the biographies included therein is of an author whose works are worthy of study. Greatness is presented as “proportionate” in Collier's text, and Frank Raffety takes a similar approach in his 1899 guide *Books Worth Reading*, which is organized to clearly distinguish among authors according to their greatness, so that readers can avoid the “risk of confusion” (iii). Raffety presents reading as a high-stakes act that must be properly approached and undertaken. This maneuver allows Raffety to promote his own work (and the hierarchy of value articulated therein) by playing on the insecurities of readers who have come to his text for guidance.

As critics such as Richard Altick, Kate Flint, and William St. Clair have demonstrated, increasing literacy rates and access to texts over the course of the nineteenth century contributed to the emergence of conversations about reading practices and books devoted to this subject. Class and gender anxieties underpin the text/reader relationship in such books, which include the Victorian reading guides, because many were written in response to the changing population of readers. Indeed, Raffety makes class-based distinctions from the very start of his text, announcing, “The quantity of literary matter of one sort and another, heavy or light, that nowadays offers itself in the form of books, periodicals, or newspapers,

almost as temptingly and readily to the poor as to the rich, is so miscellaneous and diffuse, that it is perhaps most important now to know what *not* to read” (1899, 1). Clearly, in the mind of Raffety and those like him, more readers having access to more books requires intervention because working-class readers, in particular, did not have the skill to recognize differences in quality among reading material. The anxieties about readership also extended to women and conjured broader concerns about usefulness, productivity, and leisure time. As Jennifer Phegley explains in *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*, “middle-class women readers were central to many commentaries on proper reading practices precisely because of their revered status as the protectors of morality, a status that coincided with an intense anxiety about the potential failure of individual women to live up to their idealized reputations by reading improperly” (2004, 5). The reading practices of many newly literate Victorians were not grounded in family habits, schooling, or early access to circulating libraries; thus, texts such as Raffety’s could claim to provide much-needed guidance.

Percy Russell’s *A Guide to British and American Novels* (1894) also addresses itself to readers lacking formal education in literature or reading, presenting itself as a “comprehensive” text and useful resource for busy readers. The rapid increase in the publication of novels, Russell explains, has produced readers who are less likely to have read the great works of previous generations and are, thus, “sorely perplexed” by the sheer volume of available texts. Russell’s goal, then, is “to fully meet this pressing and ever-increasing need, by enabling even those with least leisure to become practically conversant with the epochs and masterpieces of British fiction during more than two centuries” (viii). Russell addresses his text to working-class readers—those with little leisure time—and offers the opportunity to become familiar with masterpieces of literature through the summaries presented therein. His text also provides a guide for future literary pursuits. By yoking together busy readers and masterpieces of literature, Russell clearly establishes a canon of works that even the least-educated women or working-class readers should know. In attending to the development of readerly taste, critics and authors both highlight the individualism of Victorian readers and argue for the specific assignment of literary value.

Active and discerning readership was also essential for the fulfillment of one’s civic responsibilities. In the Introduction to his work *The English Language and Its Early Literature* (1878) Joseph Henry Gilmore

makes an argument about the importance of history and connects it to a nationalist point: “The present *character* of a people is largely determined by the character of their ancestors and the circumstances in which those ancestors were developed.... So it is with the *literature* of a people. All the past enters into the present, and makes it what it is. The present will enter into all the future, and give it character” (3–4). Contemporary literature and the study of it, Gilmore suggests, will be enhanced by an acquaintance with what has come before and will simultaneously shape the future. It is the responsibility of individual readers, then, to familiarize themselves with their literary heritage, so as to ensure the continued development of the English character. Moreover, by promoting the “best” contemporary works, Victorian readers can shape the way in which future generations will view them and the inheritance they have left behind. As Jennifer Phegley notes in her study of transatlantic nineteenth-century reading practices, “The profession of literary criticism was built upon the notion that the work of critics served national interests by cultivating a healthy cultural atmosphere that would preserve (or, in the case of the United States, build) the nation’s strength” (2004, 3). Critics and commentators upon literature have the power to direct readers’ attention, and reading guides frequently employed nationalist rhetoric to underscore the gravity of their work. In *A Compendious History of English Literature* (1861), George Craik concludes with a section on the current state of literature in the middle of the nineteenth century and notes that the relationship between literature and culture is symbiotic, “Whatever beliefs and opinions become prevalent among a people will, of course, colour the national literature during the time of their predominance” (2:522). For Gilmore, Craik, and other authors of Victorian reading guides, presenting their texts as resources conveys to readers that although they may not have the time to read the nation’s literature itself, they can fulfill their civic obligation by reading these helpful guides and becoming conversant with the great cultural productions of the age. Framing reading practices in this way highlights cultural literacy, in addition to textual literacy, and promotes the idea of a shared English culture, identity, and historical view.

Although their individual approaches and agendas may have differed, all Victorian reading guides attempted to discourage the practice of reading for idle pleasure—a practice that, as discussed further in Chap. 3, was closely tied to the development of the novel. Reading for idle pleasure was perceived as particularly problematic for working-class readers and

for women. In *Women's Reading in Britain: 1750–1830*, Jacqueline Pearson explains one link between reading for pleasure and the anxieties associated with such reading: “reading is not only pleasurable because it allows escape from grief, loneliness, boredom and frustration: it might also provide an indirect, even an only half conscious, language for appeal, complaint or rebellion” (1999, 93). Although Pearson specifically discusses women’s reading, the implications can extend to working-class readers as well. To counteract the tendency to read unwholesome works for pleasure, then, Victorian writers drew up lists and guides for the uninitiated.

The creation of textual hierarchies and instructions to readers in Victorian reading guides also had implications for genre and the future of the novel. Looking back, one early twentieth-century text, *The Pure Gold of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1907) declares, “England’s contribution to prose fiction during the nineteenth century was splendid. Novelists of the first rank are Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Stevenson; and to this roll of honour time will probably add the name of Thomas Hardy” (Phelps 1907, 20). Even just a few years’ removal from the “nineteenth century” proper, enables author William Lyon Phelps to begin making judgments about which nineteenth-century novelists will and will not have lasting fame. Phelps is confident about the future of the genre; however, other writers noted that although the second half of the nineteenth century produced far more literature, especially fiction, than any earlier period, the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were far more *literary* in both the production and appreciation of texts. These authors discuss the history of the novel as evidence of the declining quality of the genre. For instance, Frank Raffety declares,

It is not my wish to underrate the advantages to be gained from the best novels, intelligently read; but it cannot be doubted that many read these in but a cursory way, just for the sensation of the story. Those good old novels of Scott, Austen, or Thackeray cannot be too much read. The word ‘novel’ implied then so much more than it does to-day, when most of our sensational novels are written to catch a magazine-reading public. (1899, 7)

Here, the decline of the novel is directly connected to serial publication. Raffety was certainly not the only critic to make that connection, yet he also suggests that it is the novels of the previous generation that can

provide a remedy for the bad habits developed through the consumption of serial fiction. The author of *Descriptive Lists of Novels* (1891), William McCrillis Griswold, concurs, describing readers who are fans of Ouida,

for them, Miss Austen wrote drivel, and Sir Walter Scott prosy insanity... what they live upon is the enormous mass of novels and stories which fill the pages of cheap periodicals and serve as ballast to circulating libraries. It seems, then, that the laws of demand and supply account for the existence of thousands of novels, and since thousands of novels are required and manufactured, it is reasonable enuf [sic] to expect that they should lose the character of works of art, and be as commonplace as the daily bread to which we have already likened them. (318)

Again, Scott and Austen emerge as remedies to the fiction of the day. Their novels are individual works that challenge the mass-produced and serially published works that have come to dominate the Victorian literary marketplace, which is now characterized by an increasing democratization of fiction—more novels for more readers. This situation contributed to the proliferation of Victorian reading guides, which encouraged the reading of certain recommended works as part of one’s civic duty but cautioned against unrestrained reading, such as that described above, because it both distracted from more worthy literary pursuits and contributed to the overall decline in the nature and character of the reading public. In charting the history of the novel, then, Victorian reading guides also made compelling arguments for their own existence.

The arguments presented in Victorian reading guides were also economically motivated. That is, it was in the best interest of publishers to sell not only the reading guides themselves but also the backlist and reissued novels for which they held copyright. For instance, series such as Bentley’s Standard Novels and Routledge’s Railway Library published works that were praised in the reading guides, including the novels of Jane Austen and Edward Bulwer Lytton. Whether “intended as a guide to the general reader or the beginner” or offering “courses” of reading that included suggested texts, relevant reference materials, and points for reflection and discussion, reading guides aimed to sell and re-sell books and played on the late-Victorian impulse toward self-improvement and education (Winchester 1892, iii). In doing so, they became active participants in the construction of literary history.

“HIS HEAD IS FULL OF SOME BOOKS THAT HE IS READING UPON
YOUR RECOMMENDATION”⁵

Victorian reading guides contributed to a narrative whereby Jane Austen’s works were deemed important for Victorian readers because they promoted a particular, idealized version of morality and were read and appreciated by an elite group of male intellectuals. The moral qualities of Austen’s novels were often placed in opposition to the social ethos depicted in some fiction, such as mid-Victorian sensation novels, and celebrated as an opportunity to recapture the values of a simpler past. Indeed, Austen emerged as the heroine of the novel-reading public, promoting morality and nostalgia in her texts. As Claudia Johnson points out in her discussion of Austen’s enduring popularity, *Jane Austen Cults and Cultures*, “Austen appears to live in a magical economy where bonds of gratitude and solicitude suffice, where class relations are everywhere to be found but remain in an unalienated and unexposed state, and where service and protection cannot be bought” (2012, 92). The appeal of this somewhat idealized, eighteenth-century class structure, and the interpersonal relations that it shapes, emerges in Victorian reading guides’ celebration of Austen’s depiction of her social world and the characters within it.

Victorian sensation fiction, in particular, was placed in opposition to Austen’s works and seen as responsible for destroying the taste of contemporary readers. As Amanda Bartlett Harris notes in *Pleasant Authors for Young Folks*, “if you are so unfortunate as to be one of those whose taste has been spoiled by the modern, sensational novel (all wrong in its influence), you will, perhaps, never get beyond the first chapter [of a Jane Austen novel]” (1884, 70). Indeed, one does not read Jane Austen for plot twists or sensational revelations (the very devices that Austen mocks in *Northanger Abbey*) but for witty dialogue delivered by complex, rounded characters. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that readers accustomed to a diet of fast-paced sensation fiction would have difficulty digesting Austen’s prose. Nineteenth-century critics and authors of reading guides frequently blamed a decline in readers’ sensibility on exposure to the lax morals of sensation novels, which feature heroines engaging in adultery, murder, and other gender-bending behaviors. Jane Austen’s novels and the heroines depicted therein, these critics suggest, might offer a remedy to such ills.

In many Victorian reading guides, the morality of fiction is cast as a particularly feminine concern and surfaces in discussions of women

writers who were often praised for the moral tone of their works. Of the works of Austen, Burney, and Edgeworth, *A Compendious History of English Literature* declares, “No class of works is more honourably distinguished by fine observation, by grace, by delicate wit, by pure moral feeling” (Craik 1861, 2:296). The works of these women are not just remarkable in themselves, author George Craik notes, but they are also a source of national pride, forming “no small part of the literary glory of our country” (2:296). Similarly, in *English Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (1869) Charles Dexter Cleveland recommends reading Austen and asserts that she “was deservedly distinguished in her day as a novelist, for her beauty of style and description, and the high moral tone of all her writings” (72). This moral tone recommended her to Victorian readers whose sensibilities might otherwise be twisted by the popular fiction of the day.

In some reading guides, morality even became a critical category. For instance, *An Introduction to the Study of English Fiction* places Austen and Edgeworth in the “moralizing school” of fiction (Simonds 1894, 60) and *Manual of English Literature* notes “it was women like Jane Austen, Miss Mitford, Miss Edgeworth, and Miss Ferrier who did most to drive the spirit of sentimentalism out of novels and raise their tone not merely by purer morality, but by gentle satire. Fiction under their guidance took new lines of development; it grew more minute in its observation and more elevated in its purpose” (Arnold 1862, 6). The combination of morals and satire here speaks to both the content and form of the fiction—the novels of these women writers are effective, in part, because they are not strictly didactic but because their morality comes through in their satiric depiction of immoral or incorrect behavior. Moreover, it is the attention to detail in the depiction of that behavior that enables both the moral and the satiric impulses of their writing. This dual-edged sword of satire and morality is evident in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* when Lydia interrupts Mr. Collins’ reading of *Fordyce’s Sermons*. Lydia has insulted Mr. Collins, and Elizabeth and Jane chastise her accordingly. However, Austen’s narrator has already informed readers that Mr. Collins has been droning on “with very monotonous solemnity” after first rejecting the opportunity to read from a novel (Austen *PC&P*, 47). In doing so, the narrator satirizes Mr. Collins and creates sympathy for Lydia. The moral pendulum swings back at the end of the novel, of course, with Lydia’s scandalous elopement, leaving readers to wonder if, perhaps, she should have attended more closely

to Mr. Collins' reading. The satiric portrayal of Mr. Collins, however, renders a black-and-white judgment about the connections between reading and morality impossible, and the subtlety of such moral judgments helps to account for Austen's continued appeal for and connection with Victorian readers. Her novels conveyed a moral tone that was attractive to the conservative mainstream, but they were also delightful works of fiction that did not preach to or admonish their readers.

In addition to touting the morality of her texts as a corrective to certain mid-Victorian sensibilities (or lack thereof), authors of reading guides also called on established arbiters of literary taste to make the case for Austen's continued relevance. In *Pleasant Authors for Young Folks*, Amanda Bartlett Harris discusses the benefits of reading and offers "little biographies" of various authors, including Scott, Mitford, Lamb, Kingsley, Ruskin, and Brontë among others. In explaining the benefits of reading Jane Austen, she notes,

If there was no other reason in the world for reading Jane Austen, I would do it because so many persons who are famous in the world of letters have read her books so many times and praised them so highly. I should immediately infer that there must be something remarkably attractive about them, and that if I failed to see it, the fault would be my own. If I did not like them, I should conclude that I was lacking in appreciation; that my taste and judgment were not what they ought to be. (1884, 61)

The idea that students—both formally educated and self-taught—should read what the best minds have deemed the best literature contributed to formal education plans during the nineteenth century and continues to influence many contemporary college curricula. As reading guide author Charles Franklin Thwing asserts in his 1883 guide, "A college education consists chiefly of the reading of the best books on subjects the most important" (3). For the authors of many reading guides, including Harris and Thwing, "taste" and "judgment" refer to both literary value and the broader elements of an individual's character that can help him or her evaluate and assess that value. Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of the connection between taste and class in *Distinction* is useful for thinking about how reading guides played on social anxieties in this way. He writes, "It [taste] transforms objectively classified practices, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position, by

perceiving them in their mutual relations and in terms of social classificatory schemes” (1984, 175). Taste is cultivated by reading literature and also enables one to make judgments about what literature to read. Reading the “correct” literature, then, becomes both a signal of class status and a means to class mobility. Authors of Victorian reading guides play on class anxieties by offering socially aspirant readers the opportunity to gain knowledge and perform class through reading (or the semblance of having read) selected texts, and the association of Austen in the popular imagination with educated, upper-class, male readers lends an additional degree of gravity and importance to her works. In their discussion of Austen’s novels, reading guides highlight this association and, in doing so, underscore their own importance as arbiters of Victorian literary tastes.

The idea that her novels have been validated by previous generations and appreciated by the great minds of the nineteenth century emerges as a theme in much Victorian criticism of Jane Austen and contributes to her construction as the heroine of the novel-reading public. As Devoney Looser notes in “The cult of *Pride and Prejudice* and its Author,” throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, “Austen was the idol of educated, tasteful men, akin to one of her own heroines for her worshipping male hero-readers” (2013, 175). The popular, aesthetic version of Austen referred to by Looser represented one strain of male interest in the novelist, and Austen also garnered attention through formal critical and institutional elevation by male critics. As with other forms of criticism, the rhetoric of literary appreciation used during the nineteenth century appears to be specifically gendered, and such justifications do not appear in parallel discussions of Sir Walter Scott—the male author with whom Austen is most frequently classed. That is, although Scott is celebrated for his masculinity, critics do not need to promote his popularity among male readers as evidence of the quality of his work. With regard to Austen, however, citing the *imprimatur* of male intellectuals provided Victorian reading guides with additional support for their elevation of her works.

Victorian reading guides’ attention to the longevity of Austen’s works and their appreciation by intellectual men also reflects Victorian anxieties about how the work of their own period will endure and how their authors will be viewed by later generations. Oscar Fay Adams’ *A Brief Handbook of English Authors*, published just before his 1891 biography of Austen, argues that Austen’s novels are worth reading, in part,

because of their widespread and long-lasting appeal: “These novels are examples of the finest literary art, and have delighted cultured minds for almost three generations” (1889, 6). And, from *The Reading of Books: Its Pleasures, Profits, and Perils*, ambitious readers learn that the great readers and critics of earlier generations read and re-read the best authors: “Macaulay’s favorites were Jane Austen and Richardson; and he seems to have known Mrs. Norris, Sir Walter, and Anne Elliot, Lovelace, Sir Charles, and Clarissa, better than the most devoted student of Dickens knows David Copperfield or Mr. Pickwick” (Thwing 1883, 56). Here, author Charles Franklin Thwing suggests that not only were the novels of a previous generation “better” in the minds of many critics, but the readers were as well, because they demonstrated an unmatched devotion to the study of their favorite works (of course, Thwing does not acknowledge that Austen and Richardson wrote a combined nine novels, while Dickens alone wrote more than a dozen). Longevity and quality are equated in many Victorian reading guides, which cast both the writers and readers of the recent past in an elevated light. Victorian readers are, by comparison, found wanting in their apparent lack of devotion to their favorite works, yet authors of Victorian reading guides attempted to remedy this situation by helping readers become familiar with historical works that they did not necessarily have the time or inclination to read. In doing so, they participate in canon formation and the articulation of literary value while also ensuring the continuity of a literary tradition through the Victorian period and beyond.

Authors of reading guides built on the elevation of Austen and her works that was accomplished in the critical writings of “great men” and reinforced by the institutionalization of literature and literary studies. Two critics whose praise of Austen carried the most weight with Victorian readers were Walter Scott and Thomas Macaulay. Scott’s review of *Emma* and his diary comments about the pleasure of reading *Pride and Prejudice* (1816 and 1826) and Macaulay’s comparison of Austen to Shakespeare (1843) are frequently cited in Victorian reading guides and other assessments of Austen’s work. Scott’s 1816 *Quarterly Review* article was the only substantial piece of criticism to be published during Austen’s lifetime, and he situates his account of *Emma* in a broader discussion of the evolution of the novel. Scott finds *Emma* to be a credit to the genre, praising Austen’s depiction of “the ordinary walks of life”: “she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon

events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners, and sentiments, greatly above our own" (Southam 1968, 1:63–64). He also notes that Austen's novels share a certain moral sensibility that is still relevant for contemporary readers. Although many writers of Victorian reading guides alluded to this review, it is Scott's journal entry from 14 March 1826 that is most frequently quoted: "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 the sentiment is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!" (1:106). Unlike the review, in which Scott writes about Austen as a colleague and fellow-novelist, the journal entry is a more personal response. Many writers of Victorian reading guides read this excerpt as a specifically gendered response to Austen, and they used Scott's differentiation between his own style and that of his late contemporary as an opportunity to discuss the differences between their works in terms of masculinity and femininity. From here, a tradition of great men reading Jane Austen began to emerge.

Jane Austen was frequently classed with Scott as a premier example of the pre-Victorian novel, and Scott's influence was so widespread that in creating categories for the study of literature, Victorian reading guides frequently referred to the period spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as "The Age of Scott." As Patrick Brantlinger points out in *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, through the combined influence of Austen and Scott, "the novel gained widespread cultural acceptance, though not exactly aesthetic legitimacy" (1998, 2). These early novels, Brantlinger notes, were instrumental in establishing a tradition for fiction that would continue to strengthen as the century progressed. The comparison to Scott and inclusion in groups of writers whose only commonality was often their historical proximity to Scott strongly influenced the way in which Austen was seen by the Victorians. Even when the commentary is minimal, as in the creation of historical lists and groupings of writers from "The Age of Scott," Austen and the others, particularly the novelists, are almost always subsumed beneath Scott's genius. These "age of Scott" writers included Maria Edgeworth, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and on one occasion, King George IV. In such context, Jane Austen is frequently positioned as standing "next to Scott," with "next to" generally connoting "behind": "Next to Scott, there is no author of that time whose works, so unlike those of the great romanticist, are so

generally familiar or read with so much real appreciation to-day as quiet, homely, wholesome Jane Austen” (Simonds 1894, 62). Austen’s morals are celebrated here, yet author William Edward Simonds seems to be somewhat surprised by her popularity and unable to fathom why anyone so unlike Scott in scope and style could nearly match him in continuing acclaim. Other writers are less subtle in their judgments. Abby Sage Richardson, the author of *Familiar Talks on English Literature* notes that Jane Austen’s novels “kept the circulating libraries of the time supplied with new books, till early in this century the fame of all others was almost lost in the great splendor of Walter Scott’s success as the novelist of history” (1881, 326). Here, Austen is moved from her position next to Scott to become a mere placeholder, taking up space until Scott’s massive corpus arrives to fill the shelves of the circulating libraries. Richardson’s claim also negates the work of the dozens of other novelists—many of them women—publishing in the 1810s whose novels far outpaced Austen’s in their popularity. None of those early women writers, however, have enjoyed the same continued popularity as Jane Austen. As Brian Corman notes in *Women Novelists Before Jane Austen*, as the nineteenth century progressed, “Austen eclipsed all predecessors—even Burney—earlier fiction by women became unnecessary or irrelevant. If you can enjoy perfection, why settle for anything else?” (2009, 97). Although contemporary recovery work, such as Corman’s, has brought many early women writers back into the critical conversation, for the Victorians, Austen alone often represented women writers of the period, and she had to contend with Scott for recognition by Victorian readers and critics.

In *The Pure Gold of Nineteenth Century Literature*, William Lyon Phelps observes, “In her time Miss Austen’s novels were as completely overshadowed by the mighty works of Walter Scott as her physical strength would have been by his robust masculine vigor. But she was one of those rare individuals who are content to work for the sake of the work alone” (1907, 27). Not only does Phelps downplay Austen’s professionalism and interest in writing for more than just her own amusement, but his statement also captures the gender-specific rhetoric that frequently marked comparisons between the two authors. The insistence upon such gender categories was common amongst nineteenth-century critics and reviewers, as Joanne Wilkes points out in *Women Reviewing Women* where she notes “the widespread contemporary tendency to discuss their work in terms of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’

qualities” (2010, 153). This masculinity and femininity is also equated to value, and periodicals, like reading guides, influenced public perceptions of literary works and the perceived value of those works for readers. Indeed, Maurice Thompson notes that had Scott written a work like *Pride and Prejudice* it would have been “proof positive of a loss of masculine vigor”—a statement that is particularly ironic in a contemporary context where, for many readers, Mr. Darcy is the epitome of masculine vigor (1891, 22). Thus, although Scott’s commentary on Austen was frequently used to elevate her works and contributed to her position as the heroine of the Victorian novel-reading public, writers were careful not to elevate Austen above Sir Walter himself.

Thomas Macaulay is also frequently evoked in Victorian reading guides’ arguments about the critical importance and relevance of Jane Austen. Macaulay’s 1843 review of the *Diary and Letters of Madame D’Arblay* is a lengthy piece, primarily occupied with a re-telling of the events of Frances Burney’s life and publishing career. Austen appears only in one paragraph toward the end of the essay, in which Macaulay identifies her as the writer who has “approached nearest to the manner of the great master,” Shakespeare (561). This comparison is inspired by Austen’s characterization, which, he explains, “is done by touches so delicate that they elude analysis, that they defy the powers of description, and that we know them to exist only by the general effect to which they have contributed” (562). By comparison, Burney’s characterization falls short, and Macaulay is forced to “refuse” her “a place in the highest rank of art” (563). This is not a negative comment, however, on Burney, who Macaulay certainly admires, but rather an acknowledgement that the truly highest sphere only has space for a few individuals. Indeed, he closes the piece by noting that the work of those women writers who have surpassed Burney—notably Austen and Edgeworth—would not have been possible without her influence: “the fact that she has been surpassed, gives her an additional claim to our respect and gratitude; for in truth we owe to her, not only *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *Camilla*, but also *Mansfield Park* and *The Absentee*” (570).

Scott and Macaulay were frequently presented as the most authoritative critical voices on Austen from the first half of the nineteenth century, yet a number of reading guides also referred to Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin, whose lengthy review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in the *Quarterly Review* (1821) engages questions of readership, genre, and the character of the heroine. Like Scott, Whately

discusses the evolution of the novel before moving to a specific discussion of Austen's works. He acknowledges that novels are gaining respect as a genre and have the ability to provide both instruction and amusement. However, Whately also notes that the reader is responsible for understanding the difference between fiction and reality and should not allow him or herself to succumb to the imagination. Austen's novels, he suggests, can help the reader achieve this balance. The "moral lessons" are "clearly and impressively conveyed" but not heavy handed (Southam 1968, 1:95). Similarly, the plots are well planned and the dialogue nearly Shakespearean in its ability to convey characterization. With regard to characterization, Whately identifies one of Austen's "great merits" as her ability to write women: "her heroines are what one knows women must be" (1:100, 101). He notes that heroines are not idealized or ventriloquized through their male counterparts but instead they appear as fully formed, passionate individuals. In discussing the evolution of the novel, Whately, like the authors of many Victorian reading guides, places responsibility for self-education on the reader. Unlike some of his contemporaries, however, he does not identify Austen's "authoress" identity as a liability but rather as a unique strength that enables her to extend the boundaries of the novel and its ability to represent women.

The critical commentary of Scott, Macaulay, and Whately took on a substantial afterlife, shaping Jane Austen's reputation among the Victorians. For instance, *The Handbook of English Literature* (1865) by Joseph Angus, Examiner in Literature and History at the University of London, frames the discussion of Austen's novels with the praise of these esteemed critics and cites their commentary: "These last are the types of the novel of common life. Scott and Whately and Macaulay agree in giving her the highest praise" (618). This practice, in which excerpts from reviews stand in for the novels, is common throughout the reading guides, suggesting that readers could obtain knowledge of the texts simply by reading what others had to say about them. Although some reading guides include excerpts from the novels, others prefer to cite the reviews, thereby moving further away from the original texts and privileging the voice of the critic over the voice of the author. In doing so, the reading guides underscore the academic nature of their task and position reading as a critical, rather than purely pleasurable, activity. This maneuver also suggests that the guides might stand in for novels, providing readers with enough information to speak intelligently about the original text or write about it for an exam.

Reading guides drew on private writings, as well as published criticism, to promote Austen's novels. For instance in *English Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (1867) Charles Dexter Cleveland writes that Austen "was deservedly distinguished in her day as a novelist, for her beauty of style and description, and the high moral tone of all her writings" (72). He supports this claim with a quotation from Whately's review and then a footnote citing Scott's 1826 journal entry in which he gives an account of the pleasures of rereading *Pride and Prejudice*. Frank Raffety, too, uses a quotation from Scott's biography to support his claims about Austen, writing, "Jane Austen (1775–1817), who, with Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, is greatest amongst women novelists, wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*, between 1811 and 1817, all displaying that 'exquisite touch which renders commonplace things and characters interesting from truth of the descriptions and the sentiment,' as Sir Walter Scott said, and confessed the charm denied to him" (1899, 59–60). In a footnote, Raffety acknowledges the quotation as coming from Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, and the reference to Scott in the account of Austen serves a transitional function as well, as the very next paragraph begins, "But amongst novelists of all time the undoubted preeminence must be accorded to Sir Walter Scott" (60). Thus, Raffety can use Scott to promote Austen and also to acknowledge her secondary status in relation to her contemporary. Writers of other reading guides, including *The English Language, its Grammar, History and Literature* (1877) and *The University of Literature* (1896) use similar rhetorical strategies to predicate their praise of Austen on her appreciation by great readers such as Scott, Macaulay, or Whately.

Victorian reading guides' considerable attention to the sponsorship of great men as part of their argument for preserving Austen's legacy also highlights the apparent lack of criticism by women. Many of the authors of reading guides were women, however, and a few of the guides, such as *Young Ladies' Illustrated Reader* (1889), and *List of Books for Girls and Women and their Clubs* (1895), were aimed specifically at women readers. According to Kate Flint, attention to women's and girls' reading was bound up in the preservation of Victorian social norms, and "debates focused on what knowledge it would or would not be useful for a girl to possess; on how literature should best be studied" (1995, 118). With regard to reading guides, the treatment of Jane Austen and other women writers does not appear to differ with the gender of the author or

the intended audience of the text, and both men and women authors of reading guides rely on the testaments of “great men” in promoting her works. Women critics of Austen, however, do not receive equal attention. As Joanne Wilkes explains in *Women Reviewing Women*, such erasure of the contributions of women critics was common throughout the nineteenth century, yet these critics often brought a unique perspective to the works they were reviewing. However, women writers did make contributions to Austen’s literary legacy throughout the nineteenth century even if their contributions were not immediately recognized.

Maria Jane Jewsbury is generally credited as being the first woman critic to publish on Jane Austen. Her article, “Literary Women, no. II: Jane Austen” appeared in *The Athenaeum* in 1831. Jewsbury champions Austen as a fellow woman writer, explaining “for those who may doubt the possibility of engrafting literary habits on those peculiarly set apart for the female sex, and for those who may doubt how far literary reputation is attainable, without a greater sacrifice to notoriety than they may deem compatible with female happiness and delicacy, it is pleasant to have so triumphant a reference as Miss Austen” (553). Jewsbury acknowledges the work Austen has done as a literary foremother to writers like herself. She also notes that Austen’s fame has continued to grow since her death and credits individual readers, rather than critics and reviewers, with this phenomenon. Insightful and direct, Jewsbury’s article is neither overly praiseful nor unnecessarily harsh. The essay clearly appealed to Henry Austen who incorporated much of it into his expanded “Memoir of Miss Austen” for Richard Bentley’s 1833 *Sense and Sensibility* as “extracts from a critical journal of the highest reputation” (2002, 151). In the “Memoir,” Henry Austen combines part of Jewsbury’s essay (omitting the feminist statement quoted above) with a short excerpt from Whately’s 1821 *Quarterly Review* article.

The combination of the two essays and lack of attribution given by Henry Austen led George Henry Lewes, writing in *Blackwood’s* in 1859, to identify Whately as the sole author of the critical extracts. In his piece, “The Novels of Jane Austen,” Lewes quotes a lengthy section of the critical extract that praises Austen’s depiction of character and then declares, “it is worth remembering that this is the deliberate judgment of the present Archbishop of Dublin, and not the careless verdict dropping from the pen of a facile reviewer” (104). Lewes’ pointed commentary about the author reflects the widespread mid-Victorian association of Austen with elite male readers—including Lewes himself—although the excerpts

he cites are taken entirely from Jewsbury's article and misattributed to Whately. Scott, Whately and other male readers serve as touchstones throughout Lewes' article, which begins by noting the nature of this fraternity: "Mention the name of Miss Austen to a cultivated reader, and it is probable that the sparkle in his eye will at once flash forth sympathetic admiration, and he will perhaps relate how Scott, Whately, and Macaulay prize this gifted woman" (99). Here, Austen quite literally becomes a conduit for male self-appreciation and the development of a lineage of literary critics. Lewes uses this maneuver to set up his argument for more widespread appreciation of Austen, noting that while her English reputation is solid, due to the devotion of individual readers, her international reputation is still lacking. His critical analysis and clear celebration of Austen's works make Lewes' article one of the richest pieces of mid-Victorian criticism on Austen, and the reproduction of discourse about the male cadre of Austen appreciators in this perceptive article further underscores the way in which the idea of Austen as a man's writer, understood and appreciated only by a select few, had truly permeated both critical and popular arenas. In giving an account of the Jewsbury/Whately misattribution, Joanne Wilkes comments on the importance of women writers to Austen's literary reputation: "Jane Austen's life and works drew from women critics much insightful commentary in the nineteenth century. Some of the most valuable arose from a perception seldom shared by the men—that there was an inconsistency between the figure represented by Austen's male relatives and the kind of personality that seemed to be behind the writing in the novels" (2010, 153). Wilkes suggests that women readers and reviewers may not have completely accepted the version of Austen put forward in early family biographies and that the model appearing in the criticism of women writers was one of subdued genius rather than celebrated domesticity. Misattributions were, and continue to be, common in dealing with Victorian periodicals, as critics such as Hilary Fraser, Margaret Beetham, Alexis Easley, and Jennifer Phegley have pointed out, and this situation is exacerbated when the subject or author of the piece is a woman writer. In this particular instance, there is a lovely irony in the idea that Austen was a writer for "great men," yet one of the most influential and celebrated pieces of Austen criticism written during the nineteenth century was penned by a woman.

While Jewsbury's article is perhaps the best known, ample evidence exists to suggest that Austen was not just the property of elite male

readers. Collections of reading experiences in critical heritage texts and the Reading Experience Database point to private writings by nineteenth-century women, including Mary Russell Mitford, Sara Coleridge, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and, of course, Charlotte Brontë, that reveal a strong critical engagement with and appreciation for Austen's novels. Sara Coleridge celebrates "the delicate mirth, the gently-hinted satire, the feminine decorous humour of Jane Austen, who, if not the greatest, is surely the most faultless of female novelists" (Bloom 2008, 32), while Elizabeth Barrett Browning finds that Austen's "people struck me as wanting souls" (Bloom 2008, 35). And, as discussed above, Charlotte Brontë's visceral response to Austen touched off an extended critical debate with George Henry Lewes regarding the nature of fiction. These are among the most familiar examples, and critics including Katie Halsey and Alice Villaseñor have uncovered additional public and private writings of women writers that offer astute critical responses to Austen. Although the strong voice of women writers and critics regarding Jane Austen's novels can be appreciated in the twenty-first century as a result of the efforts of bibliographical and feminist recovery scholarship, at the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant ideology was still patriarchal, and in mainstream critical and educational discourse, the typical reader of Jane Austen was the educated, elite man whose appreciation of the novelist served as a model for the reading practices of others.

The appreciation by great men that influenced many accounts of Austen in Victorian reading guides also influenced her appearance in formal educational settings. Austen was part of the new curriculum of English literature instituted in the second half of the nineteenth century, and many reading guides were designed to help students prepare for exams. The particular attention to English literature in the curriculum, according to Ian Hunter, was due, in part, to its usefulness in teaching language and literacy as well as the ability of literature to provide a vehicle for discussions of character and "play the role of relay and support for the same moral and social initiatives that had produced the popular school" (1988, 119). Works of literature were valuable not only in themselves but also in their ability to improve both the skill and character of the individual reader. Austen's presence in these formal educational settings, then, further contributed to the canonization of her novels and also enabled her participation in the growing institutionalization of literature.

The Student's Guide to the School of "Litterae Fictitiae", Commonly Called Novel-Literature, prepared by the examiners in the New School

of Novel-Literature at Oxford in 1855, provides an interesting case study and addition to the representation of Austen's novels in Victorian reading guides. Unlike the reading guides, which were unofficially linked to educational institutions and often intended for readers outside of those institutions, the *Student's Guide* was specifically designed for students preparing for exams at Oxford. According to this study guide, a student was required to read three of Austen's novels as part of the preparation for exams in "Modern Literature," and if he wanted to pass with high honors, he needed to have read all of the novels. Other writers included in this new exam area were Madame D'Arblay, Currer Bell, and Edward Bulwer Lytton.

The Student's Guide offers sample questions for short essays, quotation identifications, translations, and original compositions. Austen and her works feature in several of these sample questions, which reflect the critical interests of the time. For example:

2. 'How could I possibly, my dear E., join your manly vigorous sketches on to a *little bit of ivory two inches wide*, on which I work with a *brush so fine* as to produce little effect after much labour?' [Miss Austen, to a friend charging her with plagiarism.]

Comment on the above metaphorical description of this authoress's style, and illustrate by the characters of Catherine Morland or Fanny Price; and characterize the style of Scott by an extension of the metaphor from pictorial art. (brackets in original; *Student's Guide* 1855, 31)

This sample question shares some of the ethos of the Victorian reading guides in that it demonstrates an interest in biography by asking students to analyze Austen's novels through the lens of a quotation from her letters. Students are also asked to attend to Austen's style—an element of her writings, as noted above, that many critics saw as being at odds with the popular fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the quotation from the letter included in the exam question implicitly asks students to focus on the simplicity of Austen's style, which seems to privilege her novels over many of the others on the list. The question also asks students to write about Catherine Morland or Fanny Price, two of the heroines who, according to the reading guides, held the least interest for Victorian readers, yet they have considerable critical interest and potential for analysis. Finally, as in the reading guides, Austen

is classed with Scott, although in this instance, rather than holding Scott as a model of the ideal novel to which Austen can only aspire, Austen's metaphor becomes the lens for reading Scott's work. The overall impression, then, that comes from this formal institutionalization of Austen is that she is a novelist suited to be read by the educated few who have the full capability to appreciate the style and literariness of her works.

Taste and style are also addressed in another sample question in which students are instructed to "Suggest heads for a Treatise on the Rhetoric of *Conversation*; and shew how far the main *principles of taste* and the more important *rules* to be observed in the *Dialogue* of the Novelist may be deduced or confirmed from the practice of Miss Austen and the Authoress of the Heir of Redclyffe; illustrating the main faults to be avoided from any of your other books" (*Student's Guide* 1855, 30). Like Victorian reading guides, this question is premised on value judgments, asking students to identify faults in taste and the construction of dialogue from other works on their reading list, and thereby elevating Jane Austen and Charlotte Yonge in comparison. The question's focus on dialogue also reflects Victorian appreciation for Austen's depiction of characters, which, as discussed in the following chapters, inspired many Victorian novelists. An exam question from the section on Rhetoric also recognizes Austen's superior use of dialogue as students are asked to "Trace minutely through its several stages the elaborate argument of Mrs. John Dashwood against her husband's intended pecuniary aid to his mother and sisters" (28). This latter activity is one that certainly might be found in contemporary university classrooms where it can be aided with a viewing of the 1995 Ang Lee film in which that scene is brilliantly portrayed. Overall, the pattern that emerges in these sample questions is one in which Austen's works are held separately from, and slightly above, those of many other novelists and promoted as contributing to the broader Victorian enterprise of creating an educated citizenry.

The admission of women to institutions of higher education also appears to have contributed to the institutionalization of Austen's fiction because, as Claire Harman points out, courses in English often attracted female students and "Austen's novels were some of the least inappropriate works of fiction for unmarried women to read and discuss with the older men who taught them" (2010, 201). Even when women could not formally attend college, they might encounter Austen on educational reading lists. An 1879 American college admission guide declares that although women could not be admitted to Harvard University, they

could still take exams, and one of the questions for English Literature required students to “give a succinct account of the life and works of” authors including Jane Austen (Nightingale 1879, 48).

Jane Austen’s life and writings helped Victorian readers organize and understand their relationship to the literary past. In reading guides and other critical works, Austen emerged as a kind of heroine whose writings could be used to promote mainstream arguments about the value and purpose of literature. The emergence of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of these guides professing to educate readers (both formally and informally) and help them manage the growing number of available texts marked the increasing institutionalization of both fiction itself and literary studies more broadly. Tracing the presence of Jane Austen in Victorian reading guides demonstrates how the Victorians simultaneously indulged in her novels as a means of escape to a so-called simpler time and conscripted them for academic and critical purposes. The formalization of these conversations in reading guides and related texts reveals Victorian strategies for approaching questions about literature and history and also locates the roots for some familiar contemporary critical practices and conversations.

NOTES

1. *A Short History of English Literature for Young People*, 9.
2. *Northanger Abbey*, 24.
3. The authors cited here represent a larger body of work on the history of Austen’s novels and their reception. See also Katie Halsey (2011). “‘Gossip’ and ‘tiddle’: 19th-century common readers make sense of Jane Austen.” In *A Return to the Common Reader*. Edited by Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland. Burlington: Ashgate, 69–86; Devoney Looser (2013). “The Cult of *Pride and Prejudice* and its Author.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*. Edited by Janet Todd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 174–185; Olivia Murphy (2013). *Jane Austen the Reader: The Artist as Critic*. New York: Palgrave; Jacqueline Pearson (1999). *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750–1830: A Dangerous Recreation*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Alan Richardson (2005). “Reading Practices.” In *Jane Austen in Context*. Edited by Janet Todd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 397–405; and Kathryn Sutherland (2005). *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*. Oxford University Press.
4. *Pride and Prejudice*, 67.
5. *Persuasion*, 86.

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