



Article

Jane Austen in Mid-Victorian Periodicals

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Abstract: Victorian periodicals were an important part of the literary marketplace that shaped Jane Austen's critical reception during the nineteenth century. Moreover, throughout the century, periodical authors used the critical conversation around Austen to create a space for themselves and their work in the press by beginning to shape a critical canon, as well as by raising and responding to questions about the nature of Victorian women's authorship. Focusing on articles published during the mid-Victorian period (1852–1868), prior to the publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh's 1870 *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, this essay considers Austen's presence in periodical writing in the middle of the nineteenth century and explores how writers used both Austen herself and her writings to accomplish their own authorial ends.

Keywords: Jane Austen; Victorian; periodicals; critical canon

Jane Austen had a consistent presence in periodicals throughout the nineteenth century. Articles included reviews of her works, responses to late-Victorian biographies, collections of letters, and political and social writings in which the authors used Austen as a point of reference for their arguments. This essay considers Austen's presence in periodical writing in the middle of the nineteenth century and explores how writers used both Austen herself and her writings to accomplish their own authorial ends. A comprehensive review would be beyond the scope of a single essay; thus, I focus on articles published during the mid-Victorian period (1852–1868), prior to the publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh's 1870 *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. This focus highlights the ways in which Victorian periodicals engaged with Austen's writings prior to the explosion of interest in her biography, and it also aligns with mid-nineteenth-century conversations that sought to define and categorize the Victorian woman's novel. Within the context of the rich contemporary scholarship on Victorian periodicals, I suggest that periodicals provided a unique space for writers—both well-known and anonymous—to engage with Jane Austen and shape her legacy for future generations of readers and scholars.

Discussions of Jane Austen in Victorian periodicals kept pace with the emergence of new editions of her works, as well as new novels by Victorian women writers, for whom Austen often served as a critical touchstone. Early reviews of her works were followed by posthumous review pieces, which drew what biographical information they could from Henry Austen's short 'Biographical Notice', appended to the 1818 publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, as well as from his expanded 'Memoir of Miss Austen', published with the Bentley's Standard Edition of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1833. As the century progressed, Austen appeared in mid-Victorian review essays on the genre of the novel and the emerging figure of the woman writer. The late-Victorian explosion of print about Austen, including James Edward Austen-Leigh's 1870 *Memoir*; the two-volume edition of Austen's letters edited by Lord Brabourne (1884); and new editions of the novels, including the 1894 'peacock edition' of *Pride and Prejudice* published by George Allan, with a preface by George Saintsbury and illustrations by Hugh Thompson, created even more space in the periodicals for pieces on Austen. Indeed, as Claudia Johnson attests in *Jane Austen Cults and Cultures*, the publication of the *Memoir* marked a turning point in both Austen studies and fan culture, as it 'spurred a more extensive interest in Austen, the republication



Citation: Wilson, Cheryl A. 2022. Jane Austen in Mid-Victorian Periodicals. *Humanities* 11: 76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11040076>

Received: 23 May 2022

Accepted: 13 June 2022

Published: 22 June 2022

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of her works, and the development of a literary marketplace for her that has operated steadily ever since.' (Johnson 2012, p. 8.) Victorian periodicals were an important part of that literary marketplace, and, throughout the century, periodical authors used the critical conversation around Austen to create a space for themselves and their work in the press by referencing periodical essays within periodical essays and raising and responding to similar questions about the nature of Victorian women's authorship.

Scholarship around nineteenth-century periodicals offers a rich and deep reservoir of critical materials.¹ Indeed, it is due to such work that it is now a critical commonplace to note the significant role of periodicals in nineteenth-century print culture. As Jennifer Phegley explains in the introduction to *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation*²:

As literacy rates rose, printing technologies improved, taxes on newspapers were revoked in England, and the publishing industry was centralized in the United States, periodicals began to dominate nineteenth-century print culture. The development of this unruly mass of periodical literature gave critics a forum in which to make their living as well as a subject around which they could build their reputations. (Phegley 2004, p. 1)

Of note here is both the emergence and widespread circulation of the periodicals themselves and the way in which the industry provided an opportunity for authors to create and hone their reputations. On the latter point, for literary critics, Jane Austen proved a useful subject, and they developed their own discourse community around her writings and their place in the development of the novel.

A brief overview of three early critical pieces on Austen provides context for the ways in which these periodical essays were used by later critics in the creation of a body of Austen criticism. Walter Scott's unsigned review of *Emma*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in March 1816, is among the most frequently cited and reproduced examples of early Austen criticism. For the Victorian readers and reviewers who cited Scott, beyond the content of the essay itself, such praise from a popular and prolific master of the novel genre offered legitimacy to Austen as a novelist. Indeed, Scott's essay takes up the subject of the novel as a genre alongside his review of Austen's work, and, although focused on *Emma*, the article also gives space to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of Austen's *oeuvre*. Interestingly, as Joanne Wilkes recounts in 'Jane Austen and the Politics of the Periodical Press', Scott's knowledge of the authorship of *Emma* is questionable: 'Nor, indeed, was Scott necessarily aware of Austen's identity, since the novels published in her lifetime came out as "by a Lady"'. However, since the *Quarterly's* publisher John Murray was also Austen's, and invited Scott to write the review, Scott might well have been told.' (Wilkes 2019, p. 135.) As a novelist writing about another novelist, Scott was, perhaps, bringing Jane Austen into the circle of accomplished writers of fiction in the 1810s and using her novels to begin defining a new movement within the genre.

Scott opens by juxtaposing the popularity of the novel genre to the relatively small number of people who actually admit to reading novels. Like Austen in *Northanger Abbey* with her famous defense of the novel, Scott makes his position quite clear:

but in truth, when we consider how many hours of languor and anxiety, of deserted age and solitary celibacy, of pain even and poverty, are beguiled by the perusal of these light volumes, we cannot austere condemn the source from which is drawn the alleviation of such a portion of human misery, or consider the regulation of this department as beneath the sober consideration of the critic. (Scott 1968a, p. 59)

As the novel genre became firmly established with both casual readers and critics during the nineteenth century, the power of fiction to enhance the human experience emerges as a recurrent theme in nineteenth-century periodical writings on the novel. With regard to Austen's novels in particular, Scott finds pleasure in the domestic and

everyday aspects of her fiction, calling her works, ‘sketches of such spirit and originality that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events.’ (Scott 1968a, p. 63.) The focus on character over plot, too, would become a familiar refrain, as critics sought to articulate what made Austen’s novels special and different from those of many other writers.

Before moving into his discussion of *Emma*, Scott provides overviews of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, thereby establishing his essay as a somewhat comprehensive critical account of Austen’s body of work and the genre to which it belongs, rather than a straightforward review of a single novel. In writing about early reviews of Austen, Mary Waldron suggests that this was a deliberate maneuver: ‘Scott chose this opportunity to place Austen’s work, including *Emma*, within the novel-writing tradition of the time, not only giving a considered estimate of the quality of her writing, but also taking an important step towards a viable analysis of the contemporary state of fiction.’ (Waldron 2005, p. 85.) In doing so, Scott was also able to establish himself as an arbiter of the genre, and later Victorian critics and reviewers responded to this, incorporating his essay into their own work.

As noted above, Scott’s essay may have appealed to Victorian critics because it lent legitimacy to Austen’s works through the popularity and prestige of both Scott himself and the *Quarterly Review*. The review is also a substantial piece, treating three of Austen’s novels with a critical lens and offering a broad discussion of the genre in general. Finally, Scott’s essay positions Austen’s novels as very much of their time, noting the realism of her fiction, although he does not use that term; they are filled with ‘common occurrences’, morals that apply to ‘the paths of common life’, and characters who are recognizable (Scott 1968a, p. 64). This aspect of Austen’s fiction, he suggests, marks it as belonging to a new subcategory of the genre: ‘a class of fictions which has arisen almost in our own times, and which draws the characters and incidents introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life than was permitted by the former rules of the novel.’ (Scott 1968a, p. 59.) As discussed further below, one of the functions that Austen serves for critics in mid-Victorian periodicals is as a counterpoint against which to measure their own cultural moment, and particularly with regard to the development of the Victorian women’s novel. Scott’s review, appearing just a few months after the publication of *Emma*, is itself a product of the 1810s, and thus both reaffirms the idea that Austen’s novels are of their time, and itself becomes another artifact from the period in the context from which the Victorians could locate themselves and their critical accounts of Austen’s fiction.

Walter Scott’s journal entry from 14 March 1826 is not a periodical publication, but it is frequently cited in mid-Victorian periodicals alongside his review of *Emma*:

Also read again and for the third time at least Miss Austen’s finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. That young lady has a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early! (Scott 1968b, p. 106)

This extract was included in J. G. Lockart’s 1837 biography of Scott and it is frequently cited by Victorian critics. Like the review of *Emma*, the extract from Scott’s journal offers an endorsement of Austen’s work by placing her novels in the hands of a celebrated author and critic. In contrast to the periodical essay, however, the journal account is more personal, and it allowed Victorian readers to see themselves and their pleasure in reading Austen reflected in the actions and words of Walter Scott. Indeed, this journal excerpt offers a specific example of Scott’s theory about the power and pleasures of fiction that he articulated in the review of *Emma* ten years prior. Written nine years after Austen had died, the journal entry also has a tinge of hagiography and foreshadows the interest in and celebration of Austen’s biography that would only expand as the century progressed.

References to Scott’s review in Victorian periodicals were frequently accompanied by references to a second canonical piece of Austen criticism: Archbishop Richard Whately’s

1821 review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, which also appeared in the *Quarterly Review*. Whately himself opens by quoting Scott's assertion that, 'a new style of novel has arisen.' (Whately 1968, p. 87; Scott 1968a, p. 63.) Like Scott, Whately talks generally about novels before moving to his main subject: moral and instructive fiction, and the role of realism in shaping these aspects of the genre. He notes that Jane Austen is second to none 'among the authors of this school', with novels that demonstrate 'practical good sense and instructive example.' (Whately 1968, p. 93.) Austen is not, Whately assures readers, a dogmatist, however, and the effectiveness of her moral instruction lies in the art through which it is delivered:

The moral lessons also of this lady's novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward, but spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story; they are not forced upon the reader, but he is left to collect them (though without any difficulty) for himself: her's [*sic*] is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life. (Whately 1968, p. 95)

Whately goes on to note how Austen accomplishes this through her use of dialogue and development of character, which he illustrates with several substantial examples from *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Whately also notes Austen's talents in depicting women, praising 'the insight she gives us into the peculiarities of female character.' (Whately 1968, p. 100.) This talent, he explains, is unique to women writers but is not always embraced by them:

Authoresses can scarcely ever forget the esprit de corps—can scarcely ever forget that they *are* authoresses. They seem to feel a sympathetic shudder at exposing naked a female mind. Now from this fault Miss Austin [*sic*] is free. Her heroines are what one knows women must be, though one can never get them to acknowledge it. (Whately 1968, pp. 100–1)

He cites several examples of Austen's depiction of Fanny Price's emotions in *Mansfield Park* to illustrate this point, and, in doing so, he anticipates later Victorian debates about women's writing, its subjects, and its scope.

Whately's article, Mary Waldron notes, 'sets the tone for later Austen commentary as well as placing the novel form decisively in the mainstream of literature.' (Waldron 2005, p. 89.) Indeed, the piece uses a discussion of the novel genre to frame the specific analysis of Austen's works. In doing so, Whately inseparably entwines the novels of Jane Austen with definitions of the novel genre in the minds of the reader. Whately's article, like Scott's, contains several elements that may have made it appealing to Victorian periodical writers. First, it is occupied with the genre of the novel, discussions of which take up considerable space in the piece. And, like Scott, Whately declares that readers should not feel ashamed of reading novels but should, instead, approach them with a critical eye. Whately's attention to Austen doing something new and different with the novel—what Victorian readers would later recognize as the seeds of their own realist novels—is also relevant. Finally, Whately, unlike Scott, specifically calls attention to the femaleness of Austen's writing and the category of 'authoress.' As Joanne Wilkes observes, he 'commends Austen, in fact, for being candid enough to represent women as similar to men in their courtship behaviour.' (Wilkes 2019, p. 43.) Whately's exploration of women's unique authorial voice and perspective, what many later critics would call 'the authoress', is one that Victorian writers would continue to explore in their writings.

While Scott and Whately are cited by later periodical writers for their comprehensive critical reviews of Austen and contributions to genre criticism, Thomas Macaulay is cited for his comparison of Jane Austen to William Shakespeare in an article on Frances Burney. Macaulay's 1843 review of *The Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay* in *The Edinburgh Review* recounts Burney's life and provides a critical account of her writings, with generous excerpts from the novels, as well as from the diary and letters. Macaulay begins his discussion of Burney's work by noting her skill at developing characters: 'It was in the exhibition of human passions and whims that her strength lay; and in this department of art she had, we think, very distinguished skill.' (Macaulay 1843, p. 559.) He continues, considering how the depiction of character is demonstrated in other art forms, and declaring that

‘highest among those who have exhibited human nature by means of dialogue, stands Shakespeare.’ (Macaulay 1843, p. 560.) Following his discussion of Shakespeare’s characters is the claim for which Macaulay is most often cited among Victorian critics of Jane Austen: ‘Shakespeare had neither equal nor second. But among the writers who, in the point which we have noticed, have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation of placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud.’ (Macaulay 1843, p. 561.) His brief discussion of Austen, a single paragraph, goes on to give the example of her clergymen as an illustration of her ability to create characters who are both ‘common place, all such as we meet every day’, yet also completely distinct and ‘discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings.’³ In concluding the review article, Macaulay situates Burney in the context of the development of the novel, noting her important role in finding ways for the genre to accomplish both humorous and moral ends. In doing so, he argues, she ‘vindicated the right of her sex to an equal share in a fair and novel province of letters.’ (Macaulay 1843, p. 569.) And, although he acknowledges that other writers have taken the genre further, Macaulay concludes his essay by firmly establishing Burney’s place in the development of the novel and the canon of women writers: ‘for in truth we owe to her, not only Evelina, Cecilia, and Camilla, but also Mansfield Park and the Absentee.’ (Macaulay 1843, p. 570.) Macaulay locates Austen in the context of other late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century women writers and celebrates her thusly, which is a pattern that would continue in later Victorian fiction. Based on a single paragraph in a forty-seven-page review essay about Burney, Macaulay has emerged as part of the Austen critical canon, with his account of her work sometimes reduced to two words: ‘prose Shakespeare.’ I will now turn to nine periodical essays published between 1852 and 1868. These essays perpetuate the canon of Austen criticism in their engagement with Scott, Whately, and Macaulay, and they also situate Jane Austen as a touchstone for women writers and the development of the Victorian novel.

The authors of mid-Victorian periodical essays frequently took up the subject of Austen’s reputation and familiarity among readers, and they used earlier critical writings to both reaffirm her position and establish their own. In doing so, Marina Cano-López writes, periodical authors treated Austen as both a woman and a ‘professional writer whose novels deserve serious textual analysis.’ (Cano-López 2014, p. 265.) George Henry Lewes was one of the leading voices in the effort to keep Austen on the bookshelves of Victorian readers. He opens his 1859 *Blackwood’s* essay, ‘The Novels of Jane Austen’, by noting her absence from several recent critical studies, including William Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1841), which does include some women writers of the period, such as Radcliffe, Inchbald, Burney, and Edgeworth. In launching his recuperative efforts, Lewes writes, ‘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.’ (Lewes 1859, p. 99.) This maneuver of citing well-regarded critics occurs regularly in periodical essays about Austen and is frequently tied to the endeavor of promoting her reputation.

Lewes invokes Scott, Whately, and Macaulay several times in his essay, using their reputations to bolster Austen’s. Comparing Austen to Edgeworth, he writes, ‘Scott, indeed, and Archbishop Whately, at once perceived the superiority of Miss Austen to her more fortunate rival.’ (Lewes 1859, p. 99.) Later, Lewes quotes from Whately’s article and reminds readers, ‘it is worth remembering that this is the deliberate judgment of the present Archbishop of Dublin, and not a careless verdict dropping from the pen of a facile reviewer.’ (Lewes 1859, p. 104.) Lewes elevates both Austen and her critics throughout his essay, and, at the same time, also inserts himself into the canon of Austen critics by placing himself in dialogue with his forebears as a reader and critic who recognizes the merits of Jane Austen’s writing.⁴ In an 1852 review essay on the works of nineteenth-century women writers, including Austen, George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell, Lewes also uses this rhetorical technique to invoke Macaulay’s comparison of Austen to Shakespeare, noting, ‘only cultivated minds fairly appreciate the exquisite art of Miss

Austen.’ (Lewes 1852, p. 135.) In both his 1852 and 1859 essays, Lewes triangulates esteemed Austen critics (Scott, Whately, Macaulay), himself as a critic, and the reader, the ‘cultivated mind’ (1852) or ‘cultivated reader’ (1859). In doing so, he offers Jane Austen as a pathway through which readers can achieve a level of cultivation, and thereby association, with an esteemed critical tradition. In her work on women’s magazines in *A Magazine of her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman’s Magazine, 1800–1914*, Margaret Beetham notes, ‘the magazine as a form empowers its readers in specific ways which encourage the possibility of diverse readings.’ (Beetham 1996, p. 11.) The relationship between periodicals and their readers that is articulated here helps to contextualize Lewes’ approach of drawing readers into the circle of critics and empowering them to promote the works of Jane Austen—an approach that benefits the periodicals, the critics, and Jane Austen herself.

Lewes would not have to wait long to join the canon of Austen critics. In 1866, the author of ‘Miss Austen’ in *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* would cite him alongside Scott, Whately, and Macaulay in the same paragraph. The author extracts a letter from Lewes to Charlotte Brontë in which the former calls Austen ‘one of the greatest artists . . . that ever lived’, and then continues, ‘Both Macaulay and Whately have compared her to Shakespeare for her power of stamping her characters with individual life.’ (1866, p. 239.) In just over a decade, Lewes had joined the ranks of those he cited, and his presence in critical writings on Austen would continue throughout the century.

Other Victorian periodical authors, too, engaged with earlier critics for the purposes of promoting Austen and establishing a critical tradition. The 1868 *Eclectic Review* essay ‘Lady Novelists’ paraphrases Macaulay’s comparison as denominating Austen a ‘prose Shakespeare’, and then goes on, ‘This is a high measure of praise to bestow upon any literary candidate, and yet, in repeating it here, we are but echoing a note of universal praise, which has been uttered by all who have been competent to decide upon their merits.’ (Hiller 1868, p. 305.) As in Lewes’ essay, the reader is invited to see himself or herself as one of the competent ‘all’ who utter the ‘universal praise.’ The critic, then, is also inserted into the conversation, and by using words such as ‘repeating’ and ‘echoing’, the critic emphasizes the role of recurrent and continual praise by readers and critics alike in establishing an author’s reputation, and by association. Similarly, the author of ‘Female Novelists—Jane Austen’ (*New Monthly Magazine*, 1852), like Lewes, employs other critics in the service of bolstering Austen’s reputation: ‘Miss Austen has not even yet, we submit, reaped her rightful share of public homage. Both Sir Walter Scott and Archbishop Whately—the one in 1815, the other in 1821—saw and proclaimed her distinguished merits in the pages of the “Quarterly Review”.’ (Jacox 1852, p. 19.) Just as Lewes appeals to readers to enter the company of ‘cultivated readers’, this author demands that readers bestow upon Austen her ‘rightful share’ of praise. In both of the above essays, there is a call to action for the reader to participate in and help with solidifying the critical tradition.

The *New Monthly* essay concludes by reiterating its purpose and leaves readers with little doubt as to Austen’s location among great writers:

the writer being persuaded that Jane Austen needs but to be more widely known, to be more justly appreciated, and accordingly using this opportunity “by way of remembrance”. If the Wizard of the North felt her Weave a circle round him *thrice*, and acknowledged at the “third reading” a yet more potent spell than at the first, surely, to know that so many living novel readers by wholesale are uninitiated in her doctrine, is a thing to be classed under Pepys’s favourite comment—“which did vex me” (Jacox 1852, p. 23)

Here, the author returns to Scott, The Wizard of the North, and makes a reference to the 1826 journal entry cited above, in which Scott describes the pleasure of re-reading *Pride and Prejudice* for a third time. The description of Scott’s praise for Austen is accompanied by three additional literary references, which thereby further underscore the importance of Austen’s work and surround her firmly with canonical figures. The first quote, ‘by way of remembrance’, is a reference to the New Testament second epistle from Peter. The second quote, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1816 poem ‘Kubla Khan’—‘weave a circle round

him thrice’—associates Austen with the celebrity of the Romantic Poets, as well as with the writings of Coleridge as a literary critic. The final reference is to the *Diary* of Samuel Pepys. All three of these works would have been familiar to Victorian readers and all carry a level of gravitas. The Christian tradition of the Bible, the critical tradition of Coleridge, and the historical tradition of Pepys weave their own circle of three around Austen’s works, which are clearly worthy of being included in this august (male) company.

In addition to serving as a touchstone for Victorian periodical writers with regard to the development of a canon of critical writing, Jane Austen also served as a touchstone for the development of the Victorian novel, and particularly the Victorian women’s novel. As Katie Halsey writes in *Jane Austen and Her Readers, 1786–1945*, ‘over the course of the long nineteenth century, Jane Austen became the publicly acceptable face of the woman writer.’ (Halsey 2012, p. 135.) Halsey explains that, for both authors and critics, comparisons to Austen evoked a sense of respectability and legitimacy that was often denied to women writers. Periodical essays dedicated to Jane Austen and her works frequently take the opportunity to expound on the question of the woman writer. Similarly, general essays on women writers single out Austen as an example. For instance, the 1865 *Saturday Review* essay ‘Authoresses’ takes as its premise the apparent tension between women writers and critics: ‘it is understood that lady writers object upon high moral grounds to anything but the most kindly criticism.’⁵ (1865, p. 601.) The author goes on to note that—from the perspective of the critic—bad literature is bad literature, regardless of who wrote it: ‘in the republic of letters there is no distinction of sexes, and that a bad novel in three volumes is not the less a bad one because it has been written by a lady who believes that she had a dedicated vocation for writing it.’ (1865, p. 602.) To further illustrate the point, the author notes, ‘the high place occupied in modern literature by names like those of Madame Sand, or Miss Austen, or George Eliot, proves that when women really write well the world is perfectly ready to acknowledge it.’⁶ Here, Austen, along with Sand and Eliot, becomes the stand-in for the ‘good’ woman writer, worthy of critical engagement. In negotiating the relationship between author and critic, the writer of ‘Authoresses’ invents a dialogue and inserts his/her perspective into it for the purpose of validating the profession and work of the critic. In doing so, the author also validates the work of certain women writers, making them emblematic of the group.

Questions about the nature of women’s writing and the critical tendency to single out Jane Austen reappear throughout Victorian periodicals, even as the periodicals self-reflexively engage with their own work. ‘Lady Novelists of Great Britain’ (*Gentleman’s Magazine* 1853), for instance, argues that the question of whether women should write is an old and tired one: ‘whenever a woman feels she has something to say which may do good, even to the lower extent of giving pleasure, she will generally find means of saying it, and had much better not be hindered.’ (Wright 1853, p. 18.) Although primarily focused on mid-Victorian authors, the piece opens with a quick spin through the early nineteenth century, concluding, ‘and we need not do more than mention the names of Miss Edgeworth and of Jane Austen.’ (Wright 1853, p. 20.) This wrap-up to the opening section follows more detailed discussions of the work of Ann Radcliffe and Frances Burney, both of whom are flawed in the eyes of the reviewer. The treatment of Austen and Edgeworth, by contrast, suggests that their work is not flawed, and also that readers would be familiar with them and not need the level of detail that is provided for the others to understand their role in establishing a tradition of women’s novel writing.

Periodical essays on Austen also provide the opportunity for general discussion about women writers. These general essays from the mid-Victorian period frequently employ the rhetorical technique of raising the question: Why are we still talking about whether women should write? And then they proceed to join that conversation themselves. As such, they create a space for themselves and their critical contributions. For instance, ‘Lady Novelists of Great Britain’ opens with: ‘Endless have been the theories which writers in different periods have broached respecting the proper work of women: it is, we believe, generally considered now to be a very tiresome subject.’ (Wright 1853, p. 18.) Focusing on the

question of writing, the author continues: ‘So with respect to the question of *which* among women should write, and *what* they should write, we have heard and read a large amount of fluent nonsense.’⁷ Then, the author goes on to contribute seven double-column pages to the debate, including an extended discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1853 novel *Ruth*.

The thesis of George Henry Lewes’ 1852 review essay ‘The Lady Novelists’ is that ‘the appearance of Woman in the field of literature is a significant fact’, and he goes on to explore the tension surrounding the question and the impact of women writers on the genre (Lewes 1852, p. 129). Here, too, Austen emerges as a point of reference, as Lewes notes, ‘First and foremost let Jane Austen be named, the greatest artist that has ever written, using the term to signify the most perfect mastery over the means to her end.’ (Lewes 1852, p. 134.) He even notes that, ‘as an artist, Miss Austen surpasses all the male novelists that ever lived.’ (Lewes 1852, p. 133.) The comparative language here may be Lewes’ sincere critical view, as his later writings suggest, and it is also an opportunity for him to carve out a space for himself as a critic, inviting others to respond to such broad and definitive statements. Indeed, similarly provocative statements appear throughout the essay, such as, ‘The man who would deny to woman the cultivation of her intellect, ought, for consistency, to shut her up in a harem.’ (Lewes 1852, p. 129.)

The 1852 article ‘Female Novelists—Jane Austen’ (*New Monthly Magazine*) is also assertive in its thesis, ‘proofs there are, enough and to spare, in the literature of our land, that clever women can write, and have written, very clever novels.’ (Jacox 1852, p. 17.) Quickly dispensing with the other early nineteenth-century women writers, the author asserts, ‘Jane Austen is surpassed, perhaps equalled [*sic*], by none of this pleasant and numerous family.’ (Jacox 1852, p. 18.) Like Lewes, the author creates space for their argument by prompting and engaging in debates about women writers and women’s novels, with Jane Austen emerging as a consistent point of reference and comparison. These authors put Austen in the context of other domestic novelists, praising those ‘readers of more refined taste and critical acumen’ who will not tolerate the ‘labored unrealities of her competitors.’ (Jacox 1852, p. 20.) Again, readers who appreciate Jane Austen are invited to see themselves as part of the critical conversation and are elevated above the everyday throng of readers of fiction.

Positioning Austen as a paragon among women writers and identifying her novels as evidence that women’s writing is a legitimate enterprise worthy of critical attention also allows writers in Victorian periodicals to use Austen to reflect their own Victorian moment, and particularly with regard to the development of the Victorian novel and the rise of the woman writer. In the introduction to the first volume of *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, B. C. Southam writes, ‘Another use to which Jane Austen was put was to reassure Victorian England as to its progress and enlightenment.’ (Southam 1968, p. 30.) One particularly charming example of this appears in *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* from 1866. This article, titled ‘Miss Austen’, opens by setting a scene that is historically distant from the current moment. The period during which Austen lived and wrote is described in rich detail as a time removed from the mid-Victorian moment: ‘when churches were kept from tumbling down by brick buttresses; when pointed roofs were replaced with flat ones of lead, and when the acme of taste consisted in replacing Gothic porches by semi-classic porticoes and lancet windows with farmhouse lattices.’ (1866, p. 237.) In this world, Jane Austen, the daughter of a clergyman, lived a quiet life, first at Stevenson, then at Bath.

Following the subheading ‘Sixty Years Since’, the author of ‘Miss Austen’ moves from biography to literary criticism. It begins, ‘One of the greatest charms to us of Miss Austen’s novel [*sic*] is the complete change of scene they afford: we are transferred at once to an old world which we can scarcely believe was England only half-a-century ago.’ (1866, p. 239.) The article then moves to a discussion of Austen’s characters, noting that some transcend history, while others are ‘types’ of their time. A discussion of this second group, characters who ‘if not actually extinct in the present day, are, we hope, nearly so, or at least much altered in appearance’, occupies the remainder of the essay and includes John Thorpe, Sir Walter Elliot, and Mr. Collins.⁸ To firmly locate their analysis in the Victorian moment,

the author introduces the discussion by paraphrasing Charles Darwin's ideas on species divergence set forth in the 1859 *Origin of Species*: 'To use a phrase of Mr. Darwin's, they [Austen's characters] have diverged so from the original type as scarcely to be distinguished from distinct species.'⁹ In John Thorpe, the author finds a more exaggerated version of the "'loud" and "horsy" men' of the current period 'as different from the "fast man" of the present day as the medical students in *Pickwick* from their successors.'¹⁰ Sir Walter Elliot, the author speculates, could not exist in the mid-Victorian political climate: 'in the present day of free speech and circulation of liberal and cultivated thought, it is hardly possible for a man to live to Sir Walter's age without having some of the bloom rubbed off his ignorant self-sufficiency.' (1866, p. 240.) Although, this statement is then qualified in the context of contemporary Victorian politics: 'But there are still so many complacent fools whose opinions are listened to with outward acquiescence, if with silent sneers, that we scarcely know whether we are justified in placing Sir Walter among the extinct monsters.'¹¹ Mr. Collins is treated the most gently of the three, with the author simply noting that clergymen have since improved. Unlike articles that compare Austen to Victorian writers, this article brings Austen into the world of Victorian readers, considering both her life and works through contemporary contexts. The article celebrates the continued pleasure to be found in reading Austen, while also offering a sense of relief that some of the character types have gone the way of Darwin's dodo.

In writing about Jane Austen, periodical essays also frequently engage in the creation of a genealogy of women writers. 'Lady Novelists', from *The Eclectic Review* (1868), puts Austen in the context of women writers, including Dinah Muloch, Mrs. Ellis, George Eliot, George Sand, Madame Charles Reyband, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Annie Thomas, noting, 'it was left for our generation to produce the women who could equal her in artistic and literary skill, and far surpass her in the profundity of her experience.' (Hiller 1868, p. 305.) Indeed, the refrain of Austen as superior to the writers of her day and more at home among the great Victorian women novelists was a common one. 'In her own line of things, Jane Austen is surpassed, perhaps equaled, by none of this pleasant and numerous family', writes the author of 'Female Novelists', following a brief account of the authors of the Minerva Press, Burney, Charlotte Smith, the Porter sisters, Edgeworth, Shelley, Mitford, Blessington, and others (Jacox 1852, p. 18). This is a critical trend that would continue, as Claudia Johnson notes in *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen*, writing that Jane Austen 'recharted the map of literary history, making her predecessors curiously inaccessible from the routes she provided.' (Johnson 1995, p. 18.) The effects can be seen in Victorian periodical criticism, where the works of Jane Austen become a starting point for the Victorian novel, and specifically the women's realist novel, rather than as a link between the women novelists of the eighteenth century and their Victorian successors—a trajectory that contemporary feminist critics, such as Johnson, have been working to adjust. Indeed, writing in the 1990s, Johnson notes that this trend carried through literary criticism into the twentieth century, and that one of the aims of her book is to restore women's fiction of the 1790s and its authors 'to the prestige they once enjoyed.'¹² 'To be fair', she continues, 'I suspect that Jane Austen has something to do with the neglect into which they have fallen since their own time.'¹³ Victorian periodicals, too, played a role in establishing this critical trend, which would last more than a century.

Austen was frequently singled out as an example of the woman writer, and many periodicals used Austen as a starting point from which to create a canon of Victorian women writers. While Austen's influence on nineteenth-century women writers has been well examined by contemporary scholars, mid-Victorian periodical writers frequently highlighted comparisons between Austen and George Eliot. This may be due, in part, to Eliot's prolific novel publication during the period covered by this essay, which marks just one of many stages in the emergence of a canon of women writers.¹⁴ The author of 'Lady Novelists' (*Eclectic Review*, 1868), for instance, discusses the history of women's writing, praising Austen as a product of her time, but also noting that her experience was limited

and ‘her circle was restricted.’ (Hiller 1868, p. 305.) The article continues, citing George Eliot as one who ‘has obtained a reputation as genuine as Miss Austen’s, but reared on a broader basis of human sympathies.’¹⁵ Indeed, Joanne Wilkes, in her essay on early critical reviews of Austen, notes that Austen’s ability to create plots and characters from ‘everyday life’ frequently surfaces as a theme in the reviews: ‘Whatever tone they adopted, commentators saw Austen as a novelist who aimed to represent everyday life with verisimilitude (the term “realism” did not enter the language till the 1850s), who strove to create characters who resembled people readers might have encountered in real life and who tried to keep her plots within the realm of probability.’ (Wilkes 2019, p. 139.) From the start, critics such as Walter Scott and Richard Whately called attention to this aspect of Austen’s fiction, and Victorian critics continued that conversation by contributing their own analyses.

‘Fiction and its Uses’ (Fraser’s 1865) takes up an extended comparison between Austen and George Eliot: ‘No English writers have been more earnest or successful realists in literature than Jane Austen and George Eliot.’ (Dowden 1865, p. 755.) Among the points of comparison are the novelists’ treatment of morality and instruction and the way in which they convey these ideas: ‘Jane Austen is pre-eminently the novelist who attains by observation; George Eliot pre-eminently the novelist who attains by meditation.’ (Dowden 1865, p. 755.) Both authors are instructive, but Eliot invites the reader to consider ‘higher things with the same truth.’ (Dowden 1865, p. 758.) This is illustrated by the discussion of the characters of Anne Elliot and Maggie Tulliver, both of whom are instructive, but the latter of whom provides the reader with ‘a more momentous spiritual impulse.’¹⁶ Indeed, in an earlier comparative account of the two writers, George Henry Lewes refers to Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and identifies the writer as one who ‘seems to us inferior to Miss Austen in the art of telling a story . . . but equal in truthfulness, dramatic ventriloquism, and humour, and greatly superior in culture, reach of mind, and depth of emotional sensibility.’ (Lewes 1859, p. 104.) Even before the arrival of Maggie Tulliver on the literary scene, Eliot’s ability to reach emotionally beyond Austen was noted by reviewers.

While this essay focuses on mid-Victorian periodical essays published before James Edward Austen-Leigh’s 1870 *Memoir*, it is important to note that the tendency of Victorian critics to locate themselves in relation to Austen increased with the additional biographical and historical information that emerged following the publication of the *Memoir*, the 1884 Brabourne edition of the *Letters*, and the numerous other literary and biographical works about Austen that appeared in the late-Victorian period.¹⁷ Similarly, the continued productivity of women novelists and rise of the woman question created even more opportunities to call forth Jane Austen as both a social and literary model. As Marina Cano-López argues in her close look at Jane Austen’s role in late-Victorian women’s periodicals, ‘Austen was also held up as a model for middle-class women in popular periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century.’ (Cano-López 2014, p. 255.) This late-Victorian engagement carried through the early twentieth century, as Devoney Looser has demonstrated in her engaging and comprehensive *The Making of Jane Austen*, and specifically her discussions of Austen’s appearance in political debates; Austen’s adoption by suffragettes, for whom she was ‘almost always cast as a rebel’; and early dramatizations of Austen (Looser 2017, p. 165).

In 1831, Maria Jane Jewsbury published an anonymous piece called ‘Literary Women’, an early feminist review of Austen in which she writes, ‘Unlike that of many writers, Miss Austen’s fame has grown fastest since she died . . . the public took time to make up its mind.’ (Jewsbury 1831, p. 553.) Mid-Victorian periodicals played a role in the public making up its mind, as well as in the creation of an early critical canon and emergent definitions of the genre of the Victorian woman’s novel. As the century progressed and print culture around Austen continued to proliferate, periodical engagement increased as well, topics continued to diversify, and Austen and her works were used to respond to the concerns of the day. Focusing in on a period of active critical reception based primarily on Jane Austen’s novels and prior to the publication of the *Memoir* and *Letters* highlights how Austen’s reputation, her chosen genre, and the work of her critics were shaped through the Victorian periodical press.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Miss Austen. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, August 1866, pp. 237–40.
- ² See for instance, Jennifer Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*; Joanne (Wilkes 2010), *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain*; Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of her Own?*; and the work of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals and *Victorian Periodicals Review*.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Here, Lewes follows a misattribution originally from Henry Austen's 1833 'Memoir', appended to the 1833 *Sense and Sensibility*, in which excerpts from Maria Jane Jewsbury's 1831 'Literary Women. No. II. Jane Austen' are subsumed into Whately's essay and attributed to him (see Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women*, and Wilson, pp. 64–65).
- ⁵ Authoresses. *Saturday Review*, November 11 1865, pp. 601–3.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Eliot published *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858, and this was followed by five novels prior to 1870. It is also worth noting that some of the most robust periodical criticism of Austen during this period was written by George Henry Lewes.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Discussions of Jane Austen in the late-Victorian period appear in Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures*; Devoney Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen*; Claire (Harman 2009), *Jane's Fame*; and Cheryl Wilson (2017), *Jane Austen and the Victorian Heroine*.

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