nineteenth centuries). If others are also convinced by Ferris’s treatment of Maturin’s novel, then we have a truly canon-breaking moment here.

The re-reading of The Milesian Chief provides an excellently skeptical springboard for Ferris’s discussion of the Irish novels of insurgency of the 1820s and how the national tale is both agitated and agitating. Ferris describes with great cogency the unsettling practices of Thomas Moore’s Memoirs of Captain Rack (1824), a piece of “ironic counter history” (131), and Michael Banim’s The Croppy: A Tale of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 (1828), which plays games with self-consciously progressive English readers, inviting them into the novel only to emphasize that they cannot really comfortably grasp this history (comprising as it does a rehearsal of the nonsectarian, rationalistic United Irishmen of the 1790s who were swept away by the supposedly more progressive, but Catholic emancipation denying, force of the British state). Inherent in such novels is a bleak view of the claims of metropolitan or national history generally. Irish writers show a sense less of their and their country’s “otherness” than of a liminal identity, which is part of the “inescapably unsettled nature of British public discourse” in the period after the 1790s when Britain was supposedly becoming an increasingly settled and homogenous civic polity, and when British aesthetic confidence might be seen to be at a zenith following the achievements of two generations of Romantic writers. Ferris’s book is a rich addition both to “Irish Literary Criticism” and to our awareness of a fraught cultural stream in the early decades of nineteenth century Romantic Britain.

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There is some question, evident in both scholarly conversations and in the MLA Job List, whether the distinction between Romanticism and the Enlightenment is a good one, or whether we ought instead to talk of a
long eighteenth century” that runs from 1688 to 1837 (or, for that matter, from 1650 to 1850). However that may be, the distinction seems alive and well in Jane Austen studies, which has given us, within the space of three years, Clara Tuie’s Romantic Austen (Cambridge University Press, 2002), William Deresiewicz’s Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets (Columbia University Press, 2004), and Peter Knox-Shaw’s Jane Austen and the Enlightenment.

Knox-Shaw is not reticent about his intervention. His target is Marilyn Butler’s seminal Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Clarendon Press, 1975), the book that put to rest the idea of Austen as a hermetic writer, sketching the lives of a few provincial families on her little bit of ivory. Butler’s Austen, in contrast, is intensely aware of her place in both political and literary history: indeed, she attempts nothing less than a conservative reformation of the novel itself, whose eighteenth-century origins are decisively Whig and latitudinarian. Austen, in this reading, punishes characters who try to think for themselves or go their own way; under the watchful eye of the narrator and her surrogates, Austen heroines learn to submit their desires to the needs of a larger society around them. Austen’s relationship to the Enlightenment, then, is conservative and dialectical: she fights against its liberal implications with one of its own best weapons, namely the novel itself.

Knox-Shaw notes that much of the best work on Austen in the intervening thirty years has “implicitly opposed” Butler’s reading; he goes on to say, somewhat more dubiously, that no one has “provided a rebuttal” (4). A rebuttal, in any case, is the task he sets himself here. Austen’s Enlightenment, for Knox-Shaw, is not the radical French Enlightenment but the centrist Scottish Enlightenment: skeptical, nonpartisan, tolerant, and Anglican. Because Butler had run the various strands of enlightenment together, Knox-Shaw’s effort to pull them apart again raises the possibility that it is not so much Butler’s reading of Austen that Knox-Shaw is “rebutting” as it is her reading of the Enlightenment.

The book itself is divided into two parts; the first treats the three early novels and their Enlightenment context; the second considers the later three novels, plus the unfinished Sanditon, within the context of what Knox-Shaw calls “the new age.” These chapters are notable not for offering new readings of Austen but rather for how an immensely detailed background of eighteenth-century ideas becomes in effect a foreground, displacing the novels themselves with a host of facts in a manner that defies compact summary. As a way of representing this approach, I’ll discuss a chapter from each section.
science; James’s prologues and epilogues to the various plays that the
Austen family performed in the 1780s taught Jane how the theater could be
motivated in the service of speculative humanism; Jane’s naturalism, too,
has its source in James’s own apparent affinity for the unheroic style

The picture that Knox-Shaw offers of Austen’s youthful environment
as witty, progressive, and tolerant has the important benefit of breaking
down perhaps the most dated aspect of Butler’s argument, namely the
opposition between enlightenment and Christianity. In making Austen a
daughter of the moderate Enlightenment, Knox-Shaw correctly elucidates
the variety of ways in which Anglicanism was a fellow-traveler and co-
conspirator with the liberal and scientific projects of the eighteenth

But if Butler overstated the case for Austen’s conservatism by mis-
construing the content of her Anglicanism, Knox-Shaw’s corrective goes
too far in the other direction. Though he is correct to note that eighteenth-century Anglicanism was a “rambling edifice” (6), the edifice he
produces is so capacious that it excludes nobody. He wants Austen to be
part of an Anglicanism that read David Hume and Adam Smith. But
reading Hume and Smith is different than agreeing with them—a
distinction that Knox-Shaw’s methodology prevents him from making.
Even Joseph Priestley shows up as an implicit member of this big-tent
Anglicanism, which would have surprised the man regularly referred to in
the establishment press as “Gunpowder Joe.” More worryingly, Knox-
Shaw asserts, on thin evidence, that Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural
Religion “were generally taken to be of a theistic tendency throughout the
nineteenth century, and even beyond” (7). It is hard to know what to make of
this claim: does Knox-Shaw mean that the predominant reading of the
Dialogues from the date of their publication in 1779 was theistic? If so, this
ignores the well-documented concerns of Hume’s friends like Smith and
Hugh Blair, who urged him not to publish the Dialogues; it also ignores
contemporary reviews of the Dialogues, which invariably read off Hume’s
views from those of his skeptical character Philo. Or is Knox-Shaw
distinguishing between the eighteenth century, which did understand
Hume as a religious skeptic, and theistic readings from the “nineteenth
century and…beyond”? This is perhaps more historically plausible, but
then how can this later, theistic reading of Hume be claimed as an
important influence on the Austen household of the 1780s?

This may sound like a quibble, but it is not; it goes to the heart of
Knox-Shaw’s methodology, which is to summon a rich intellectual context
and then, through a process that remains unclear and under-theorized,
posit that context’s influence upon the style, form, and content of a group
of novels. This is a problem that historicist criticism has not yet solved;
one virtue of Knox-Shaw’s book is that it raises the problem to the level
of allegory: the name for context, here, is “James Austen,” while the name
for text is “Jane Austen.” Fraternity and homophony help us forget that
we have been offered no specific reason why one should slide into the
other.

The second part of the book treats the later novels in the context of
what Knox-Shaw calls “the prevailing sense of a darker and more cruel
world” that challenged Enlightenment optimism (161). James Austen
drops out, replaced by war, famine, and national debt. Individual chapters
prove Austen’s relationship to evangelicalism (Mansfield Park), sovereignty
(Emma) and Regency-era romance (Persuasion). Austen’s response to this
crueler world is, not surprisingly ambivalent; indeed, what Knox-Shaw’s
book implies, but can’t say, is that Austen’s relationship to the Enlighten-
ment was a Romantic one, characterized by just the sort of post-1789
ambivalence about the Enlightenment legacy that led William Wordsworth,
in Tintern Abbey, to describe his 1792 self as “more like a man / Flying
from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he
loved.” That Knox-Shaw continues to think of these darker tones as
aspects of the Enlightenment is perhaps a symptom of the power that
constructs such as “the long eighteenth century” now exert. The chapter
on Persuasion is suggestive in this regard, for here Knox-Shaw argues that
the novel critiques the war-romances of Scott and Byron from “a domestic
and female point of view” (224) that is subsequently linked to the “goals
of Enlightenment feminism” (237) but then re-described as “post-
Enlightenment” because, unlike Wollstonecraft and other 1790s feminists,
Austen insists among other things “on the value of strong feelings” and
“on the excitement of sexual attraction” (241). By this time, one wonders
what is left of the “Enlightenment” that Austen is supposedly such a
proponent of, or why Knox-Shaw is so committed to holding on to the
word.

The answer, I think, is that the aim of this book is not so much to
refashion Austen in Enlightenment dress as it is to refashion the Enlighten-
ment in Austenian dress. Up to a point, this is a good technique: the
virulence of the Revolution debate in England makes it all too easy to
forget that the Enlightenment does not reduce to the philosophes. Scholar-
ship of an earlier era, moreover, tended for its own institutional reasons to
over-emphasize the distinction between Enlightenment and Romanticism.
Working against these tendencies, Knox-Shaw makes Austen part of a
broadly continuous tradition of moderate Anglican enlightenment that survived the turbulence of the Napoleonic era bloodied but unbowed. Yet the tendency to think in terms of historical continuities rather than ruptures runs its own risks. It is one thing to note that Anglicanism tried its best to accommodate the stunning variety of ideas and cultural formations bequeathed to it by the eighteenth century. It is another thing to claim that it succeeded. By the close of this book, “Jane Austen” has absorbed not only the Enlightenment contextualizations that had gone under the name of “James Austen”—she has absorbed the cruel world of modernity itself by becoming an allegory of Anglicanism’s rambling edifice, able by sheer dint of genius to contain multitudes.

The best recent books on Austen have, by and large, eschewed the tendency to think in terms of such abstractions as “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism.” Claudia Johnson’s *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (University of Chicago Press, 1988) focuses on gender and on the writings of Austen’s immediate contemporaries; William Galperin’s cheekily named *The Historical Austen* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) uses reception theory to uncover a history of the everyday within the novels themselves. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* has neither the theoretical ambition nor the critical reach of either of these books. Indeed, it might be read most productively together with another recent book, D. A. Miller’s *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton University Press, 2003), for Miller’s focus on Austen’s style, what he calls her “genius for detachment,” is brilliantly theorized but deliberately unhistoricized. Knox-Shaw’s Austen is also a detached, bemused, and mildly ironic figure, nicely historicized but seriously under-theorized. To hold both books in the same hand is to get a sense of the challenges involved in grasping a writer whose elusiveness seems the condition of our affection for her...