

# **JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS**

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Jane Austen's Novels by George Pellew

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**GEORGE PELLEW**

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*A BOWDOIN PRIZE DISSERTATION.*

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BY

GEORGE PELLEW.

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TO

THOMAS SERGEANT PERRY

*This Essay is Dedicated*

BY A STUDENT OF HIS

"ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY."

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Towards the end of that century the reaction against cold reason reached its height. Then the imagination of poets was stimulated by ghosts and graves, and readers asked only to be charmed into delicious melancholy by the plaintive notes of a lute, or to be thrilled to "pleasant horror" by a "creaking hinge in an old castle." "A novel now," said George Colman, in his "Will,"

"Is nothing more  
Than an old castle and a creaking door,  
A distant hovel,  
Clanking of chains, a gallery, a light,  
Old armor, and a phantom all in white —  
And there's a novel."

People were then more impressionable than they are now, and tears flowed easily. In Miss Austen's time, however, there was springing up a feeling of dissatisfaction with the romantic writing. When novels abounded, similar in tone to "The Monk," which, we are told, mothers had to keep locked up from their daughters, it was natural that earnest women like Mrs. Barbauld and Miss Edgeworth should take alarm. Miss Edgeworth in 1801 entitled "Belinda" a moral tale, "not wishing to acknowledge a novel," since "so much folly,

error, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination." And in Miss Berry's journals, and the memoirs of Mrs. Barbauld and Mrs. Opie, we may see how strong an undercurrent there was of antipathy to the popular literature, and that Jane Austen was not alone in discovering its absurdity.

What made most women of that generation quake with fascinated terror, only excited her mirth. When a mere girl, she wrote little stories, for she was a born story-teller; but "instead of presenting faithful copies of nature," says her biographer, "these tales were generally burlesques, ridiculing the improbable events and exaggerated sentiments which she had met with in sundry silly romances."

One of these early tales was, as I have said, the original of "Sense and Sensibility;" and part of another, probably, re-appears in Henry Tilney's imaginary account of the mysteries of Northanger Abbey, with which he frightens timid Catherine Moreland. Marianne Dashwood in "Sense and Sensibility" is obviously intended to represent the popular heroine of the more sentimental romances. "Sensibility," which, as Mr. Saintsbury has pointed out, originated in France, was one characteristic of the romantic reaction against the eighteenth

century's love of reasonableness, other signs of which we find in a revived interest in the miraculous, and in a new feeling of the picturesque in scenery and in history. This "sensibility" consisted in a certain conventional susceptibility to love at first sight, an excessive and rather melodramatic abandonment to emotion and tears, and a somewhat sophisticated fondness for dwelling on the details of one's sensations. The development of this fashion has been traced from Madame de la Fayette's "La Princesse de Clèves" to the "Adolphe" of Benjamin Constant. But, whether Miss Austen was acquainted with the romances of Marivaux and of Madame Riccoboni or not, the more immediate predecessor of Marianne was, doubtless, Amanda Fitzalan, in the "Children of the Abbey," which was published only a year before "Sense and Sensibility" was written. In Mrs. Roche's estimation the most important thing for a man or woman to possess is a "heart of sensibility," and she has given one to Lord Mortimer as well as to Amanda. The heroine, from the time she first sees and immediately falls in love with the perfectly accomplished hero, to the end of the three volumes, is in a perpetual state of tumultuous or tearful excitement. An exag-