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## ***Lady Louisa Stuart on Jane Austen: 1821-1822***

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In the Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart to Miss Louisa Clinton (1901), edited by Hon. James A. Home, there are comments on the novels which seem to have passed unrecorded by historians of Jane Austen's early readership and reputation. In this first letter, Lady Louisa (1757-1851, the youngest daughter of John, 3rd Earl of Bute, Prime Minister at the beginning of the reign of George III), addresses Louisa Clinton (1797-1854), a younger woman of almost equally aristocratic descent (Miss Clinton's grandfather was the first Earl of Sheffield). Both women remained unmarried.

(pre-May 1821): 'Did you ever read Emma, a novel of Miss Austen's? I have seen three or four Harriet Smith's taken up and let down again, and you not being quite a Harriet Smith, your good Genius would rather you were not of the number. The present inmate is rather of the Miss Jane Fairfax class, and the first I have known so favoured. All this is Hebrew to you if you have never read Emma. Oh! How I wish (and have long wished) for the Mr Knightley to come and take the government on his own shoulders, then everything would go on as it ought' (p. 144).

The allusion to the 'present inmate' is a detail of domestic history inaccessible to us today. Nonetheless, the point comes through clearly that early readers of the novels were quick to identify Jane Austen's characters either with living persons or living types. The government which was to have 'Mr Knightley' to set things right was the highly unpopular Tory Ministry of Lord Liverpool, in office since 1812; and the recent events which Lady Louisa could have had in mind include the economic distress and reform agitation, Peterloo, the repressive Six Acts, the Cato Street Conspiracy and the trial of Queen Caroline.

The second extract comes from a letter dated 9 September 1822; Lady Louisa has just received a 'cargo of books 'from her lending library: 'We tried Mrs Opie's Madeline [1822], but it was perfectly not, as an old opera-singer I knew used to say in his broken English – really would not bear reading at all, especially as we had been engaged with poor Miss Austen's Mansfield Park and Persuasion, which will bear it twenty times over' (p. 270).

Striking recognition, indeed, for the sheer quality of Jane Austen, that her two novels will 'bear' such reading and re-reading. 'Poor' Miss Austen, presumably from the note of pathos in Henry Austen's 'Biographical Notice of the Author' prefaced to *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (1818). In the opening paragraph, Henry advises the public 'that the hand which guided that pen is now mouldering in the grave'.

As a footnote to these extracts it is valuable to learn of Lady Louisa's view of authorship – she was a minor story-teller and versifier, as well as a writer of fascinating letters: she held

‘to an old and strong prejudice against appearing in print - a prejudice that she retained through life; for in her early days it was considered a loss of caste for a woman of good position in society to write for publication’ – a ‘prejudice’ reflected in the publication of Jane Austen’s novels ‘By a Lady’.

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### *Notes*

1 Northanger Abbey and Persuasion (Oxford, 1933, p.3.

2 Ed. The Hon. James A. Horne, Lady Louisa Stuart: Selections from her Manuscripts (1899), Introduction, p. ix.