Zeteo: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*

Reading Women Reading

By Rachel M. Brownstein

Review of Belinda Jack, *The Woman Reader* (Yale University Press, 2012)

"We were always encouraged to read," Elizabeth Bennet tells Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who has impertinently asked whether she and her sisters had a governess. Her remark begins to account for why so many women readers—J.K. Rowling among the latest—have admired the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*: like us reading about her, this novel heroine is a reader. Where a governess might have usefully instructed the Bennet girls in the accomplishments expected of young ladies, and polished them to perform well in society, being encouraged to read has in contrast encouraged them—Elizabeth, at least—to be less conventionally feminine. "Lone reading is an inherently antisocial activity," Belinda Jack explains, "and the onus on women has been, and often remains, to be sociable and to facilitate easy human relations. Reading is intensely private and literally self-centered." Self-centered, that is, not in the more usual, more metaphorical sense of being selfish or self-involved, but rather focused and centered on one's inner life, sense of self, or subjectivity. Elizabeth does not make a show of her reading like her sister Mary, who quotes from books, or Caroline Bingley, who reads the second volume of the novel that Darcy is reading; and she claims to prefer other activities to picking up a book. But readers of *Pride and Prejudice* recognize her as a fellow reader. They admire her for having a mind of her own, and speaking her mind—for having a private life she cultivated quite as Darcy recommends, by extensive reading.

Reading what? Not, presumably, instrumental books—conduct books or cookery books or books about midwifery or mothering, all of which were written in her era with

female readers specifically in mind—but reading that gratifies and cultivates the intellect and the imagination. (The erudite Belinda Jack, an Oxford-based British scholar, writes about both kinds of books in her history.) In Jane Austen's time, men urged young ladies to read books of fatherly advice and meanwhile mocked them for reading novels, fashionable sentimental or gothic tales about the amorous adventures of imaginary young ladies like themselves. In *Northanger Abbey,* Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe "shut themselves up to read novels," and the narrator satirically explores the value and effects of such reading. Jane Austen herself, like many of her contemporaries and some of her heroines (Marianne and Elinor, Fanny, Anne) also read books of information—philosophy, history, and travel books—and poems and plays as well as novels. Jack's important point in *The Woman Reader* has to do with shutting oneself up to read. To place a book between yourself and the people you live with is to distance yourself from the social world—and its requirement that women be pleasant and useful to other people, first of all.

Talking about herself and her sisters, Elizabeth Bennet uses the pronoun "we"; in *Northanger Abbey,* Isabella and Catherine shut themselves up together, and the narrator declares her solidarity with other women, writers and heroines both. Awareness of the commonality of women and the feminist aim of sisterhood are often imputed to women's reading groups, whether in New York or in Teheran (photographs of both groups are included in *The Woman Reader*). But this book's emphasis is on the individual woman reader nourishing her sole self. The focus on romance-reading, from Mary Wollstonecraft's time (and Jane Austen's) to Tania Modleski's and Janice Radway's (our own) has, it turns out, been too narrow: both feminists and misogynists have insisted too much that women read for sexual excitement, and that reading makes them dissatisfied wives. The woman reader Jack considers here reads all kinds of books; reading, she cultivates the freedom of her mind, and in the course of reading she learns about the possibilities of further freedom.

The point is subtle and new, and it sometimes gets lost in a short, crammed book about a huge subject that engages other huge subjects: the histories of education and literacy and of the material book. Jack's learned, energetic, and wide-ranging chronicle is, she acknowledges, indebted to the work of both feminist literary scholars and historians of the book. As she also acknowledges, it tells two stories, one about women readers and the other about men's obsession with them. She begins at the beginning of history, or writing, and ends in the place she began, the Middle East, concluding with a swipe at contemporary

repressive regimes. Throughout, the tone is brisk and confident. The history moves from the Mesopotamian Princess Enheduanna, "the first author we know of to sign a work," to the successful British blogger Catherine Sanderson, who was inspired by another blogger, "Dr. Brooke Magnanti, a UK-based scientist and a former London call girl." Jack has any number of fresh things to say, observing, for instance, that Heloise in posing her questions "did not seek answers from Abelard, but the opening of an intense and extensive dialogue in which she would maintain a certain control." Jack's freedom from ideological blinders allows her to be less hard than usual on John Gregory, the patriarchal author of the successful conduct book, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774).

There are arguably too many stories here, and a heterogeneous wealth of illustrations, and quotable quotations from writers ranging from the British playwright Richard Sheridan to the American woman of letters Wendy Lesser, raise innumerable further questions to pursue in further reading. But Belinda Jack's major contribution is the valuable point she makes in her introductory essay: the powerful forces of censorship and repression deny books to women, and reading is a liberating practice and an antisocial one. (Interestingly, in a very different recent book, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain,* the Harvard scholar Leah Price argues that husbands and wives in Victorian novels frequently avoid domestic intimacy with one another by getting behind books and newspapers.) It appears to be too soon to lament the death of reading: new technologies and new reading practices have inspired—among other things—fresh new looks at the enduring phenomenon.

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