

Chawton House Library Fellow's Lecture

21st January 2010

Mary Russell Mitford reads Jane Austen

Dr Katie Halsey, University of Stirling

Mary Russell Mitford is perhaps best known (at least in Austen circles) as the woman who repeated two contradictory rumours about Jane Austen's life and character, which presented her as both 'the prettiest, silliest most affected husband-hunting butterfly' and 'the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of "single blessedness" that ever existed... a poker—but a poker of whom every one is afraid'. Less often remembered is Mitford's passionate defence of, and engagement with, Austen's novels, shown in her letters (especially those to Elizabeth Barrett Browning), her literary autobiography *Recollections of a Literary Life* (1852), and her *Our Village* stories (1824-32) and *Belford Regis* (1835).

Mitford's fiction is full of intertextual references to Austen's, which will form part of the subject matter of this paper, but Dr Halsey will focus primarily on the ways in which Mitford deploys her reading of Austen and other writers to position herself within contemporary literary and feminist debates. In Austen, Mitford found a literary model, and she came to a sense of her own place and purpose in the world of letters partly through her reading of Austen's fiction. She positioned herself, like Austen, as a writer of domestic realist fiction focussed on small village communities, hoping explicitly that her work would be 'as like Miss Austen's as possible,' and she also found Austen's works personally consolatory. Throughout the paper, Dr Halsey will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which Mitford champions a particular model of reading, drawn from her own reading of Austen, which is opposed to the stereotypes of the female reader found in the nineteenth-century periodical press.



© National Portrait Gallery

Lecture Tickets: £10 & £7.50 for friends/students

6.30pm Reception with wine

7.00pm Lecture



To book, or for more info, call 01420 541010 or email info@chawton.net.

Chawton House Library, Chawton, Alton, Hampshire GU34 1SJ www.chawtonhouse.org
Registered Charity No 102692