

On Novel Reading*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A large part of the current issue of the American Jewish Archives is devoted to American Jewish literary endeavor during the twentieth century. Even during the eighteenth century, however, there were American Jews who were neither strangers to the world of letters nor unresponsive to the values and pleasures of literature. New York-born Isaac Franks (1759-1822), who was related to the famous and wealthy Franks clan of Colonial New York and Philadelphia and was a veteran of America's war for independence, apparently cultivated an interest in the best and most characteristic fiction of his day. His views are reflected in a brief, hand-written, feuilleton-like statement — "On Novel Reading" — found among his papers. "On Novel Reading" dates probably from about 1800. Whether Franks copied its sentiments from another source, or whether — as is perhaps more likely — he was himself their author, they suggest a sympathetic acquaintance on his part with the art of the novel, still a relatively avant-garde literary form during the late eighteenth century and as such a subject of some controversy among fanciers of literature. Franks, who seems to have been familiar with "the works of Homer, of Virgil, and . . . of the immortal Milton," saw fit, nonetheless, to champion the works of still famous writers like the Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and the English novelists Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Tobias George Smollett as well as those of lesser figures like the popular Irish novelist Regina Maria Roche and the English novelist Frances Burney.

The practice of reading novels has been condemned by many persons of distinction. Novels are represented by them as ruinous to young persons. I beg leave, however, to dissent from an opinion so confidently urged. It is with diffidence I differ from high and respectable authorities. Yet freedom of opinion is a blessing which

* From a copy in the Library of the American Jewish Historical Society.

I value very highly and should be loath to relinquish. I shall, therefore, offer a few sentiments on the subject.

Amusements are necessary for youth. Now what amusement can be more innocent and, I might add, more improving, than reading well selected novels? What can be better calculated gently to assuage the pangs of distress, to soothe the afflicted mind, than novels? To follow an Amanda, an Evelina, or a Cecilia through their distresses, to participate in their anguish and in their transports, is to be capable of every finer feeling. Lost to sensibility and taste must be that heart which is insensible to the charms of a well written novel. But they are all fictions, say the enemies of novels. So are the most celebrated compositions. The works of Homer, of Virgil, and even of the immortal Milton are of this description. But, if the writer be true to nature, it is the universal language of truth. Those who exclaim so loudly against novels, I cannot help thinking, are either dissemblers or entirely deficient in taste or sentiment. Does the name change the essence of any object? Would not a rose smell as sweet by any other name? When I hear a young lady or gentlemen declaiming against novels, I always suspect that she has no taste for reading; and what is the consequence? An utter poverty of intellect, a tasteless, vapid, trifling mind, a mind employed in dress, tittle-tattle, and scandal. If the plot be well imagined and the characters well supported, the ideas and language forcible, chaste, and correct, the name by which it is called is of very little importance.

Ignorance and malignity may decry this species of writing; but in my opinion, the names of Cervantes, Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, Roche, and Burney will and ought ever to command the admiration of those who possess feeling, discernment, and taste. Away, then, with the hypocritical cant which condemns this delightful entertainment! And shame upon those who gormandize novels indiscriminately in private and in public revile them! The time devoted by females to this entertaining pursuit would be past [passed] in improper employment, or with still greater impropriety, thrown away in luxurious ease and listless indolence.

I. FRANKS