The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen

Jane Austen is unique among British novelists in maintaining her popular appeal while receiving more scholarly attention now than ever before. This introduction by Janet Todd, leading scholar and editor of Austen’s work, explains what students need to know about her novels, life, context and reception. Each novel is discussed in detail, and the essential information is given about her life and literary influences, her novels and letters, and her impact on later literature. For this second edition, the book has been fully revised; a new chapter explores the ways in which Austen’s work has prompted imitations, adaptations and creative spin-offs. Key areas of current critical focus are considered throughout, but the book’s analysis remains thoroughly grounded in readings of the texts themselves. Janet Todd outlines what makes Austen’s prose style so innovative and gives useful starting points for the study of the major works, with suggestions for further reading.

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The Cambridge Introduction to
Jane Austen

Second edition

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Preface to the second edition

In revising this *Introduction*, I have left most of the material as it was written nine years ago, and I take the liberty of echoing Jane Austen’s ‘Advertisement by the authoress to Northanger Abbey’ to point out that during these nine years ‘places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes’. I cannot pretend to have kept up with these changes; so I have primarily expanded on some points that I judged obscure or too summary, elaborated a few textual details, increased the bibliography, and corrected errors of reference. I have added a new chapter on the amazing growth of novel adaptations and spin-offs from the works and on the exploitation of the image of Jane Austen herself and the technicolour Regency she is made to inhabit: taken all together, these uses, adaptations, and images now form the global Jane Austen ‘industry’.

Thanks to Emily Auerbach, Diana Birchall, Sandie Byrne, Devoney Looser, Dorothea-Sofía Rossellini, and Helen Taylor for guiding me through this extraordinary new world.
Preface to the first edition

In this introductory study I am offering a detailed reading of the six completed novels of Jane Austen together with enough background material for a student to locate the works in their historical moment. This is especially important for those novels conceived at Chawton in the last years of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. I have, however, concentrated on what strikes me as contributing most to Jane Austen’s universal popularity: her ability to create the illusion of psychologically believable and self-reflecting characters. Her novels are investigations of selfhood, particularly female, the oscillating relationship of feeling and reason, the interaction of present and memory, and the constant negotiation between desire and society. Charlotte Brontë memorably wrote that Austen avoided the passions, that she rejected ‘even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood’. Although in a mode quite different from Brontë, Jane Austen – sometimes ironic, rarely unrestrained – has none the less become for me on this latest rereading a writer about passion. I am not suggesting that she unequivocally celebrates it but that, through her representation of character, she reveals a fascination with its literary construction and narcissistic power, its marvel – and at times its absurdity.

In the eighteenth century, medical writers, experimental scientists, philosophers, and the literate public were intensely interested in the subject of the self, especially the emotional self. Living mammals were cut open to see their hearts pump; less brutally, human beings were subject to almost scientific inspection. There grew up ‘an experimental approach to the knowledge of character’, so that emotion ‘caused by misfortune, evil agents, an author, or a scientist, can invite either objective scrutiny or sympathetic identification’. The novel served this interest through its experiments with character, while its representations often accorded with attitudes in contemporary medicine and philosophy.

In a celebrated passage of Tristram Shandy (1759–67), Laurence Sterne’s narrator remarks that if there had been a window on to ‘the human breast ... nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man’s character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and looked in, – viewed the soul stark naked ... But ... our minds
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shine not through the body. Austen’s novels allow limited transparency of the feeling body, but only after the reader has done more than draw up a chair softly.

I have composed the Introduction while overseeing the Cambridge Edition of Jane Austen’s complete works and a volume of contextual entries. Some of the arguments and material of the editors and contributors have undoubtedly seeped into the book and, following a remark in Emma, ‘seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken’. I hope I have noted direct influence and I apologise for inadvertent or distorted borrowing. I would especially like to thank Deirdre Le Faye, Richard Cronin, Dorothy McMillan, John Wiltshire, Edward Copeland, and Brian Southam. I have appreciated suggestions from David Hewitt, Derek Hughes, and Jennifer MacCann. In addition, I am most grateful to Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press for her careful reading of the manuscript. My main debt is to Antje Blank for her help and many insights.
Abbreviations


Quotations from Jane Austen’s novels are taken from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen and, where appropriate, sourced to volume and chapter using the following abbreviations:
E  Emma
J  Juvenilia
LM  Later Manuscripts
MP  Mansfield Park
NA  Northanger Abbey
P  Persuasion
P&P  Pride and Prejudice
S&S  Sense and Sensibility

Subheadings in this book are taken (sometimes slightly adjusted) from Jane Austen’s letters, her novels, and well-known biographical and critical works.