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978-0-521-67469-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen

Janet Todd

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Jane Austen*

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JANET TODD is Herbert J. C. Grierson Professor of English at the University of Aberdeen.

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Preface

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'.¹ Although in a mode quite different from Brontë, Jane Austen – sometimes ironic, rarely unrestrained – has nonetheless 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 – 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'.² 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 onto '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 shine not

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through the body.⁷³ Austen's novels allow limited transparency of the feeling body, but only after the reader has done more than draw up a chair.

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.

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Abbreviations

<i>L</i>	<i>Jane Austen's Letters</i> , ed. Deirdre Le Faye, third edition (Oxford University Press, 1995), referred to in the text by page numbers.
<i>FR</i>	Deirdre Le Faye, <i>Jane Austen. A Family Record</i> , second edition (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
<i>Memoir</i>	James Edward Austen-Leigh, <i>A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections</i> , ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: World's Classics, 2002).

Quotations from Jane Austen's novels are taken from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen* and sourced to volume and chapter using the following abbreviations:

<i>E</i>	<i>Emma</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
<i>NA</i>	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Persuasion</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>S&S</i>	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>

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