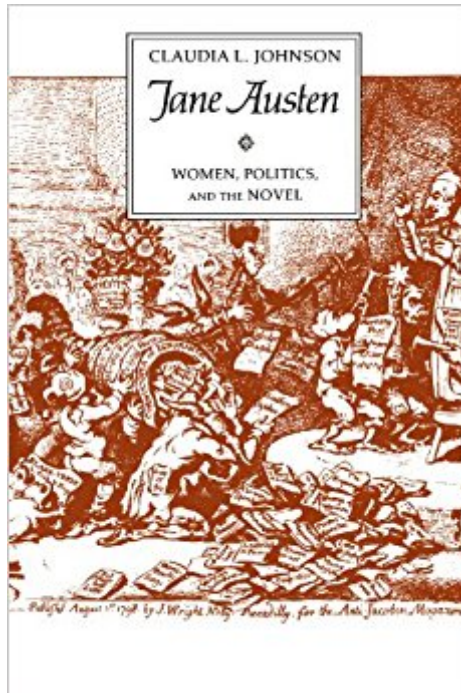




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Jane Austen: Women, Politics, And The Novel



Synopsis

"The best (and the best written) book about Austen that has appeared in the last three decades." —Nina Auerbach, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* "By looking at the ways in which Austen domesticates the gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, examines the conventions of male inheritance and its negative impact on attempts to define the family as a site of care and generosity in *Sense and Sensibility*, makes claims for the desirability of 'personal happiness as a liberating moral category' in *Pride and Prejudice*, validates the rights of female authority in *Emma*, and stresses the benefits of female independence in *Persuasion*, Johnson offers an original and persuasive reassessment of Jane Austen's thought." —Kate Fullbrook, *Times Higher Education Supplement*

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Customer Reviews

Johnson places Jane Austen in a tradition of 18th-century women novelists who, while not overtly reformist, are skeptical of conservative ideology. These novels use the vocabulary of the family as a paradigm for the condition of the state, focusing on "the discourse rather than the representation of politics." Johnson, widely read in 18th-century philosophy, social analysis, and fiction, speedily rescues Austen from the "a-political" charge often leveled against her. She is less successful on the novels themselves, tending to isolate issues and insights without following through on their role in the novel or oeuvre as a whole as when she sees Austen's heroes as exemplifying patriarchal positions without discussing their function as the object of the heroine's love. Suzanne Juhasz,

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Claudia L. Johnson is the Murray Professor of English Literature at Princeton University.

If the accepted Jane Austen is the tea sipping, dancing, hearts-and-flowers- forever daughter of a Country Vicar, this book offers an alternative. Jane Austen as cranky critic of the social order - a social order that deprecated her intelligence, told her continually to hush and not rock the boat. SUBMIT. Basically, Johnson asks us to look behind the expurgated biography and letters left us by her nephew, and view her work in the context of other novels by women (and men) amid the debates of her time regarding class, the roles of Women, the debates that took place about the equality of Women - or its lack - at this time. If you assume Austen was a Tory, anti-Jacobin, conservative in belief and act, you would expect her to spout the accepted party line: Women, Submit to your Husbands. As Johnson points out, even little Fanny Price is not on this square. Her characters are far more complicated, and ultimately not at all submissive. Well worth reading. Especially when all the hearts and flowers commentary starts to gag you with its sweetness.

Ms. Johnson's scholarly book, which examines how Jane Austen was and is received as a woman writer, is a very thoughtful and lively one. I enjoyed it very much, and expect that it will influence future re-readings of all Miss Austen's work, especially "Mansfield Park." I will not be looking at Sir Thomas in at all the same way when I next encounter him. (I had already experienced grave doubts about Edward...) If you want a thought-provoking (though on occasion overly combative) experience of modern criticism of the Austen canon, this book will suit you very well.

I have enjoyed Jane Austin's books for a long time. Claudia Johnson helped me see how the books would be seen in Austin's time which increased my understanding and love of the books. As an example, Elizabeth Bennett is an unconventional heroine. Her laughter and energy was extremely unusual and was the sort of behavior that conservative fiction and propriety books of the time saw as improper. It was easy for me to miss this point since Elizabeth is the sort of person that we are expected to admire today. This book definately comes from a political and feminist viewpoint. At the time Austin was writing, the patriarchal society was considered an important part of England's defense against the ideas of the French Revolution. Johnson looks at how Austin examines and questions the assumptions of conservative thought while working within its accepted framework.

She also highlights the irony that runs through Austin's work. I have read other criticisms of Jane Austin's books as this is the one that has had the most to say to me.

I generally avoid literary criticism, preferring to enhance my understanding of an author through history and biography, but I recently picked up three books on Jane Austen that have made me rethink my position. This is a very readable look at Jane Austen as a female author during a time when the proper behavior of woman was a hotly debated issue. In this volume, Johnson considers the literary context in which Austen was writing, and then relates each of her novels to it. This book was nicely complemented by Margaret Kirkham's *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, which I read about the same time. The latter approaches the period from a slightly more historical, rather than literary perspective. The two are not repetitive, but rather mutually enriching. Johnson struck me as a little more politically doctrinaire, which is a minus for me, but a plus for some. A second book that may be of interest is Alison G. Sulloway's *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*. Sulloway is discussing the same general topic, but she chiefly focuses on writings about proper female conduct, rather than literature. I suppose that we chose our own Jane Austen, and I prefer the clear-eyed social critics whose lack of delusions have frightened some of her readers. This being the case, I particularly enjoyed Johnson's reading of *Sense and Sensibility*. Many critics, such as Claire Tomalin (*Jane Austen: A Life*), have complained because Austen describes Marianne as getting over Willoughby and going forward to thrive as Mrs. Brandon. Johnson notes that if Marianne had in fact died of her illness, or if the younger Eliza had conveniently died, it would have been a standard, patriarchal sentimental solution to the "problem" of women disappointed in love, permitting the eternal preservation of loyalty to a man who has meanwhile gone his merry way. One wonders what bit of sickly sentimentality the critics of Austen's ending would like: Marianne renounces love and devotes herself to good works? Mrs. Willoughby conveniently dies? Or, pulling out all the stops: Eliza dies giving birth to a second, stillborn child fathered by another man (thus vindicating Willoughby's assertion that she wasn't really innocent, so his abandonment of her is less serious); Marianne successfully begs Colonel Brandon to let her rear her beloved Willoughby's child (a girl, naturally); Mrs Willoughby elopes with a lover (thus making Willoughby an injured party and allowing him to keep her dowry); after the divorce, Marianne and Willoughby marry, he is redeemed by her love, and she bears his heir. Faugh - I congratulate Johnson for cutting through such nonsense. I am somewhat less convinced by Johnson's analysis of Austen's portrayal of Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, but she builds a good enough case that I will have to reread the novel. I think she goes a bit off track in *Mansfield Park*. I think that Mrs. Norris

was more incitor than adjutant to Sir Thomas' less admirable notions, although she certainly was both. I can see why Johnson finds the relationship of Fanny and Edmund disturbingly incestuous, but this is reading 20th century attitudes back into earlier times. I don't think Jane Austen thought this, and since the book purports to be analysing what she intended to say, this should be roped off a bit more. The notes are nicely done, with running titles of the pages on which the citations appear, so it is easy to match up cite with note. The notes contain additional factual information, so the reader may find that it pays to check on them while reading. There is an index, but no bibliography. While the notes serve the latter function, it would have been nice to have a list of contemporary writing that were discussed. David Monaghan's *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* deals with different aspects of the author's commentary and I found it to be a worthwhile complement to this work.

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