

On the Money

Uses of Austen: Jane's Afterlives.

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Review by Rachel M. Brownstein.

"Jane Austen was always on the money," I email back to friends who send me the news that her image, replacing Darwin's, will "grace" the British ten-pound note. My pun pleases me: playing off literal and figurative, high and low, is part of the Jane game. There's a truth or two in it, as well. Austen was exactly right in predicting what would give lasting pleasure to readers, also shrewd about money. R.W. Chapman's edition of the novels lists the characters' incomes in the index; everyone knows that in Austen's courtship plots noble motives for marrying are mixed up with venal ones (see Elizabeth Bennet on first seeing Darcy's beautiful grounds at Pemberley; *ironic*, we wrote in that margin).

Unsurprisingly, the ironies pile up around the proposed ten-pound note: turns out it will sport a notoriously *prettified* portrait of the novelist, an image of *her rich brother's house*, and a quotation recommending reading from that hypocrite Caroline Bingley, who only pretends to read. People are talking about it: Will the new money *misrepresent* Jane Austen, much as the ongoing for-profit Jane Austen industry does? Is this shamelessly trendy move by the British government even worth noting (no pun intended)? Does irony come with the Austen territory?

Uses of Austen: Jane's Afterlives, a collection of essays by cultural critics, suggests some answers to these questions, but only by the way. The writers consider how the work of Austen imitators (e.g., Stella Gibbons, Elizabeth Taylor, and Dodie Smith), adapters (Gurinder Chadha, Emma Tennant), and translators illuminates a changing culture. The subject is well worth discussing, and the level of discussion is high. Furthermore,

the title of the collection points toward a stunning central irony: that this novelist whose ambition was only to portray human nature in the best chosen language (and by the way to make some money) has since the World Wars proved immensely *useful*. As the critical essays collected here show, Austen has been exploited for their own practical professional purposes by filmmakers and translators, mashers up, dumbers down, and spinners off, and of course by analysts of their work. Her life story (mostly unknown) has been filled in from her fictions; her very name or, as we say now, her image (but there are no satisfying portraits) is widely used as an adjective, usually to mean old-fashioned, romantic, and traditionally English. "Bin Laden a Huge Jane Austen Fan" is the title of one lively essay here, borrowed from an implausible—of course, ironic—headline.

In her magisterial opening essay, Deidre Lynch proposes a reason why Jane Austen should have continuing currency in this post-historicist (and arguably post-historical) moment. Literary-historical periodization, she points out, was a phenomenon of Austen's time; Austen, a writer of the 1790s and 1800s, was misplaced in literary history nearly from the get-go as an "Augustan" rather than a "Romantic." Lynch, along with Kathryn Sutherland and Claudia Johnson a doyenne of Jane Austen reception studies, is like her colleagues a feminist critical of R.W. Chapman and mid-century male devotees (Leavis, Trilling) of the most perfect artist among women. She has written influentially about Austen as a signifier of reactionary politics, a mascot for capitalism and the Heritage industry. Full of substance and interest, her argument here is well worth pondering. But I wonder: do the personal and professional limitations and ambitions of editors and critics account for Austen's cultural clout? Was the wrong-headed appreciation of the novels as "Augustan" and "classical" and therefore (paradoxically) "timeless" motivated only by careerism, politics, and the cultural shift we call

modernism? What about the novels themselves—their narrow focus, their wit and economy of expression, and the coherence, clarity, and character of their language, form,

and tone? What has Austen's treatment of precisely the themes that preoccupy us—time, place, family, and nation; money, morality, and marriage; gender and culture; language and class, high and low culture, or (in her terms) politeness and vulgarity—to do with her continuing interest? And what about that fact that she was (as it were, ironically) both a wit and a woman—as well as a writer of fictions that flirt with truths?

Lionel Trilling, years ago, observed that the opinions of Jane Austen's work are almost as interesting and important to think about as the work itself. This is, I think, because of her enormous influence. A powerfully readable novelist who shaped the expectations and perceptions of generations, giving them the stories and the language with which to understand their lives and relationships, Jane Austen created and continues to inform her afterlife, which is pervaded by her signature irony. Like the Marianne Dashwood she imagined, Austen was born to an unusual fate. She earned fame, fortune, and the love of women (and some men) many years after she published and died. The story tells well: she did not throw herself away; in the end or close to it, immortality and eternal life, and by the way extraordinary use value for innumerable others, have (ironically) rewarded her.

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