

## An In-Depth Study of *P&P* The Cambridge Companion to *Pride and Prejudice*

Edited by Janet Todd.

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3 B/W illustrations. Softcover. \$24.99.

Review by Marsha Huff.

It is a commonplace that Jane Austen has become a brand, marketable in any form, from elaborate editions of her books to humble merchandise on Etsy. As Janet Todd says in her editor's preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's second novel has attained its own status as a global brand. The acclaimed *Cambridge Companion* series, which usually focuses on one author, as it has on Jane Austen, in this case explores a single novel.

Subjects include not only the novel but also its fame, influence, and legacy. Chapters on narrative (by Thomas Keymer), character (by Robert Miles), and minimalism (by Andrew Elfenbein) focus on Austen's writing technique and stylistic choices. Peter Knox-Shaw discusses the philosophers who influenced her. Anthony Mandal explains the history of the story's composition and publication. The novel is placed in its literary context by Linda Bree, its historical setting by Bharat Tandon, and its economic context by Robert Markley. Judith W. Page examines Austen's use of estates to delineate character.

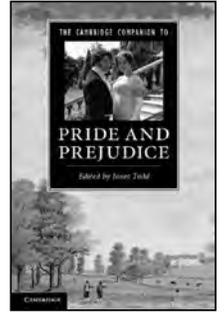
Janet Todd contributes a masterful survey of the critical response to *Pride and Prejudice* over the past 200 years and a chapter on Mr. Darcy as romantic hero. Devoney Looser provides perspective on the cult status of the novel, and Gillian Dow writes about historical and contemporary translations. Laura Carroll and John Wiltshire cover incarnations of *Pride and Prejudice* in film and television adaptations, and Emily Auerbach tackles the proliferation of novels and advice books based on Austen's work.

One of the pleasures of a well-edited collection is the interplay of ideas and opinions that arise among contributing scholars. The question, for example, of whether Austen's original draft of the novel was in epistolary form is considered in two essays. Keymer points out that *Pride and Prejudice* is a better candidate for epistolary origins than *Sense and Sensibility*, citing the centrality of letters in the final text and the fact that the heroine is separated from confidantes for much of the action. Mandal, on the other hand, finds persuasive evidence that the novel was written in direct narrative form, referring to Jan Fergus's emphasis on the influence of Frances Burney's *Camilla*, with its third-person narrator.

Austen's thematic use of estates in the novel provides a rich field of analysis. Page examines the way the main characters relate and respond to the houses and estates they encounter. Discussing Pemberley, Page says that "the house and grounds are metonyms of their owner and his masculine attractions" and, further, that Pemberley is "the metonym for the personal and communal values" that Austen advances in the novel. Markley similarly analyzes Darcy and Bingley in relation to their properties. Bingley's diffidence about buying an estate shows that "he lacks the inherent sense of the responsibilities of owning an estate that help to form Darcy's character as master of Pemberley." Miles sees Austen's use of the estate in the context of Aristotle's concept of telos—the end toward which we strive to realize our true nature. Austen's heroines realize their telos through a particular kind of marriage and a particular kind of household, embodied in the estates they occupy, which represent both home and community.

Regarding the early reception of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mandal quotes *The Critical Review's* observation that the work "rises very superior to any novel we have lately met with in a delineation of domestic scenes." This assessment preceded by three years Walter Scott's often-quoted praise of Austen's realism.

Todd, in her chapter on criticism, reports an apt remark by Lord Byron's future wife, Annabella Milbanke: she expressed strong interest in Mr. Darcy and said that the novel was the "most probable fiction" she had ever read.



Elfenbein's essay provides a particularly interesting analysis of Austen's style by examining what she omits. His premise: "A long tradition of reading Austen as a master realist has masked her weird, experimental minimalism." Eighteenth-century Britain loved the kind of physical description of faces, dresses, houses, and landscapes that Austen rarely provides. Instead, she "locates realism not in the pile-up of sensory detail but in an awareness of how human perception makes the same space look different to different observers."

Differing perceptions of the novel by its readers are examined in Looser's essay on cult followings, which have in each era reflected the prevailing cultural climate. Looser begins with the reverence for Elizabeth Bennet expressed by educated men in the 19th and early 20th centuries—what she calls "the Men's Club"—and goes on to first-wave feminists, who appreciated Austen's satire, social criticism, and professional success as a woman, and then to the current wave of Darcymania, originating in Colin Firth's screen popularity. Looser concludes that the novel "functions more like a cultural Rorschach test than a 'universal' work of fiction."

All told, the fifteen essays in this volume amount to a college seminar on *Pride and Prejudice* taught by a roster of international scholars. The painting on the cover is an 18th century view of Chawton Great House.

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