

**CLAUDIA JOHNSON. 2014. *JANE AUSTEN'S CULTS AND CULTURES*.**

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*Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* is a valuable, more-than-welcome addition to the growing field of analyses of Jane Austen's afterlives. It offers a comprehensive overview of Jane Austen's status as a consequence of a historical process, carrying different cultural meanings over time. Proof of the scholarly interest in Austen's afterlives is the proliferation of volumes on the topic, namely Harman's *Jane Austen's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (2010), Brownstein's *Why Jane Austen?* (2011), Welles's *Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination* (2012), Barchas's *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location and Celebrity* (2012), Dow and Hanson's *Uses of Austen: Jane's Afterlives* (2012), Yaffe's *Among the Janeites: A Journey Through the World of Jane Austen Fandom* (2013), Raw and Dryden's *Global Jane Austen: Pleasure, Passion and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community* (2013) and Mirmohamadi's *The Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen: Janeites at the Keyboard* (2014). Johnson's aims in this monograph seem to be to ascertain how Austen has become such a cult figure and to understand why readers have continued to love her from the 19th century to the present.

In a well-written introduction that succeeds in bringing a smile to the readers' faces, Johnson begins with the telling of a ghost story, where the spectre is no other than Jane Austen herself. Johnson explores her own journey from being a 'serious' Austen scholar (an Austenite) carrying out textual criticism on *Mansfield Park* to being a 'Janeite' who decided to write this book when she invoked Jane Austen's spirit. All jokes aside, there is no better way to start a book on Austen's cults than by alluding to the phantasmal quality that is present in Janeism: the idolatrous enthusiasm for Jane Austen that emphasizes again and again the living quality of Jane Austen, as if she had never died.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, entitled "Jane Austen's body", provides the best analysis of Jane Austen's portraits so far. The gripping and engaging chapter sheds light upon the Austen portraits since they are all equally responsible for the creation of Jane Austen's legend. Trying to solve the mystery of what Austen really looked like, Johnson explores the authentic portraits – the unsigned pencil and watercolour sketch by Cassandra purchased by the National Portrait Gallery and the watercolour sketch by Cassandra which focuses on Jane Austen's back – and the fake portraits and engravings that aimed to prettify the sketch and that have become widely reprinted, as is the case of Andrews' engraving. Johnson also analyses Austen's grave and tombstone above it, as well as a three-panelled stained-glass window at Winchester cathedral, silhouettes, and even recent controversial acquisitions such as a portrait by Roy

Dauids, which has of late given rise to heated debates about the authenticity of the piece. The chapter finishes ironically and hints at the impossibility of knowing Austen's true looks since the only genuine portrait of the novelist – the other one is unsigned – is the one which depicts the authoress with her back turned. Given that she was apparently invisible and disembodied, the portraits have then played a crucial role in constructing her legend. Chapter two, “Jane Austen's Magic”, concentrates on the presence of Jane Austen in the Victorian period. Johnson traces the development of Austen in order to understand Janeism, but also pays attention to how she “provided and relieved anxieties about modernity and its attendant exhaustion that were distinctively Victorian” (69). Johnson's concluding remark is that Austen was simultaneously located in the mundane and in the marvellous in the Victorian era; there was a tendency to invest Austen's mundanity with magical quaintness.

Of particular interest are chapters three and four, which focus on the appropriation of Jane Austen during WWI and WWII respectively. With these two chapters, Johnson aims to challenge the long-held view of Austen as an apolitical writer, since she had an overwhelming effect and relevance during the wars. In chapter three, for instance, Johnson highlights the fact that Austen's novels were often the cherished companion of the WWI generation in general and of English soldiers in particular. As Johnson claims, Austen ‘the writer’ died when the great conflict of her time was concluding, and her death was commemorated when another great conflict was happening. Rudyard Kipling's story “The Janeites” – set at a London Masonic Lodge in 1920 with a shell-shocked veteran as the protagonist – is explored in depth. Thus, Jane Austen entered the modernist imagination via the trenches. The main difference between Victorian Janeites and Kipling's Janeites lies in the fact that the former linked Austen nostalgically to a gentle England, whereas the latter regarded the writer as already part of a violent atmosphere; she was “with them there on the [WWI] front, offering a way to be in an absurd and doomed world beyond their control” (104). Therefore, Kipling's Janeites equated war to domesticity. Chapter four emphasises Jane Austen's popularity during WWII; many people read her books during the bombing raids since her art was found to be comforting under circumstances of shocking duress, but also because she was a gentle individual who embodied a therapeutic “ideal of the graciousness of the English and England during the late Georgian period in periods of comparable loss and desolation” (127). In this chapter, Johnson delves into *MGM Pride and Prejudice* (1940), to demonstrate how political the movie was. The film adaptation was made to create a space of Anglo-American solidarity, for it represented English character, gender and landscape as issues worth fighting for. The last pages of chapter four are devoted to the opening of Chawton Museum in 1948, which became a memorial for Philip John Carpenter, a lieutenant and Austen devotee who died in action in Italy in 1944, and to Austen herself. Claudia Johnson offers a strong conclusion to the section referring to Winston Churchill's desire to read Austen's novels to recover from the war, highlighting, once again, the political nature of her fiction.

The last chapter, entitled “Jane Austen’s House”, tackles the issue of literary tourism. It focuses on Jane Austen’s dwellings and emphasises that the visitors will be both charmed and disappointed at the same time. Although there are indeed some genuine Austen objects in the house, most of them are not original and there are even several items that are not connected with Jane Austen at all. There are yet more paradoxes and contradictions. In spite of the fact that Chawton is known as Jane Austen’s house, the writer only lived there from 1809 to 1817, the building was inhabited by a considerable number of poor people, by farmers, and even two murders took place there. Yet, the place is haunted by nostalgia now, since Janeites memorialize Austen at Chawton: there is a desire to impersonate and recover the writer’s personal objects. The volume is brought to a close with an afterword that stresses Jane Austen’s ubiquity, popularity and even power to sell: she serves a commercial purpose. Curiously enough, “the conditions of Austen’s current celebrity seem to rescue Austen from the disembodiment that has been a steady theme in this book” (181). Johnson ends her monograph asking herself rather thought-provoking questions, wondering about what the future holds for Janeism, or whether it is going to ever end at all. She even alludes to the newest tendency of Janeism: Austen fans prefer the film versions to her books. As for its Afterword, its main drawback is its length, as it should have been turned into a new chapter. Given that Johnson explores the evolution of Jane Austen’s cult, she should have provided a deeper analysis of Jane Austen’s appropriation in present-day society. The readers are left stranded with appetite for more.

Claudia Johnson’s *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures* is a bold work that constitutes a major contribution to the field of the novelist’s afterlives. Its captivating, well-researched and, sometimes even hilarious chapters argue that the status of Austen as a cult figure is the result of a historical process/evolution. With this work, Johnson paves the way for future research and highlights the necessity to understand the role that Jane Austen has played and still plays in the popular imagination.

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