

On Jane Austen

(mostly from Syrie James' site: SyrieJames.com)

Whenever I take up "Pride and Prejudice" or "Sense and Sensibility," I feel like a barkeeper entering the Kingdom of Heaven. I mean, I feel as he would probably feel, would almost certainly feel. I am quite sure I know what his sensations would be—and his private comments. He would be certain to curl his lip, as those ultra-good Presbyterians went filing self-complacently along. ...

She makes me detest all her people, without reserve. Is that her intention? It is not believable. Then is it her purpose to make the reader detest her people up to the middle of the book and like them in the rest of the chapters? That could be. That would be high art. It would be worth while, too. Some day I will examine the other end of her books and see.

Mark Twain

One doesn't read Jane Austen; one re-reads Jane Austen.

William F. Buckley, Jr

My favorite writer is Jane Austen, and I've read all her books so many times I've lost count ... I imagined being a famous writer would be like being like Jane Austen. Being able to sit at home at the parsonage and your books would be very famous and occasionally you would correspond with the Prince of Wales's secretary.

J. K. Rowling, 2003

There are some writers who wrote too much. There are others who wrote enough. There are yet others who wrote nothing like enough to satisfy their admirers, and Jane Austen is certainly one of these. There would be more genuine rejoicing at the discovery of a complete new novel by Jane Austen than any other literary discovery, short of a new major play by Shakespeare, that one can imagine.

Margaret Drabble, in her introduction to "Lady Susan; The Watsons; Sanditon," 1974

Jane lies in Winchester—blessed be her shade!
Praise the Lord for making her, and her for all she made!
And while the stones of Winchester, or Milsom Street, remain,
Glory, love and honor unto England's Jane.

Rudyard Kipling, 1924

There have been several revolutions of taste during the last century and a quarter of English literature, and through them all perhaps only two reputations have never been affected by the shifts of fashion: Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's... She has compelled the amazed admiration of writers of the most diverse kinds.

Edmund Wilson, 1944

Also read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!

Sir Walter Scott, 1826

(Jane Austen's novels) appear to be compact of abject truth. Their events are excruciatingly unimportant; and yet, with *Robinson Crusoe*, they will probably outlast all Fielding, Scott, George Elliot, Thackeray, and Dickens. The art is so consummate that the secret is hidden; peer at them as hard as one may; shake them; take them apart; one cannot see how it is done.

Thornton Wilder, 1938

I was a little mortified to find you had not admitted the name of Miss Austen into your list of favorites... Her flights are not lofty, she does not soar on an eagle's wings, but she is pleasing, interesting, equable, yet amusing. I count on your making some apology for this omission.

Chief Justice John Marshall, in a letter to Joseph Story, 1826

Miss Austen was surely a great novelist. What she did, she did perfectly.... She wrote of the times in which she lived, of the class of people with which she associated, and in the language which was usual to her as an educated lady. Of romance—what we generally mean when we speak of romance—she had no tinge: heroes and heroines with wonderful adventures there are none in her novels. Of great criminals and hidden crimes she tells us nothing. But she places us in a circle of gentlemen and ladies, and charms us while she tells us with an unconscious accuracy how men should act to women, and women act to men. It is not that her people are all good; and, certainly, they are not all wise. The faults of some are the anvils on which the virtues of others are hammered till they are bright as steel. In the comedy of folly, I know no novelist who has beaten her. The letters of Mr. Collins, a clergyman in *Pride and Prejudice*, would move laughter in a low-church archbishop.

Anthony Trollope, 1870

The key to Jane Austen's fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her facility... as if she sometimes over her work basket fell... into woolgathering, and her dropped stitches... were afterwards picked up as... little master-strokes of imagination.

Henry James, 1905

...Jane Austen, of course, wise in her neatness, trim in her sedateness; she never fails, but there are few or none like her.

Edith Wharton, 1925

To believe (Jane Austen) limited in range because she was harmonious in method is as sensible as to imagine that when the Atlantic Ocean is as smooth as a mill-pond, it shrinks to the size of a mill-pond... Look through the lattice-work of her neat sentences, joined together with the bright nails of craftsmanship, painted with the gay varnish of wit, and you will see women haggard with desire or triumphant with love.

Rebecca West, 1928

I am inclined to say in desperation, read it yourself and kick out every sentence that isn't as Jane Austen would have written it in prose. Which is, I admit, impossible. But when you do get a limpid line in perfectly straight normal order, isn't it worth any other ten?

Ezra Pound, in a letter to Laurence Binyon, 1938