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'Gentle humour' to 'savage satire': Austen obituaries on her death, its centenary and bicentenary

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**Chapter 1. ‘Gentle humour’ to ‘savage satire’:
Austen obituaries on her death, its centenary and bicentenary**

Annika Bautz

A ‘modest and retiring lady novelist’, ‘the adored aunt of boisterous nephews and nieces rather than a blue stocking’ to some, to others an author with a ‘strong feminist streak’, ‘biting irony’, and ‘imperishable wisdom’: this essay investigates cultural perceptions of Austen at three points in time as evidenced through obituary articles published on her death in 1817, at the 1917 centenary, and at the bicentenary in 2017.¹ Rather than focusing on how her texts are interpreted by readers or critics of her novels, by viewers and consumers of tv, film, and multimedia adaptations, websites and other media, the chapter explores cultural assumptions about Austen in the national and local press, views that are often not based on the novels or their spin-offs.² Newspaper articles are written by and for non-specialists and therefore give an indication about Austen’s cultural status. For 1917 and 2017, articles included here are those published in July 1917 and July 2017 on the occasion of her centenary and bi-centenary.³ For 1817, obituaries in the national press were consulted, as well as contemporary reviews of her novels: obituaries at the time of her death were short and did not contain views of the novels; including contemporary reviews therefore enables comparison and consideration of developments in popular culture’s view of Austen and her texts over two hundred years. The essay explores each period’s version of Austen, and discusses what she is seen as being about and associated with, as well as ask to what degree her public reputation is based on the novels, spin-offs, her life, or on cultural construction.

1817

¹ *Reading Mercury*, 21 July 1917; *Positivist Review*, 1 August 1917; *Newcastle Journal*, 18 July 2017; *The Birmingham Evening Mail*, 18 July 2017; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 16 July 2017.

² For studies of Austen’s popular reception, see for example: Devoney Losser, *The Making of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 2017); Janine Barchas, *The Lost Books of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Juliette Wells, *Everybody’s Jane* (London: Continuum 2011); Annika Bautz, *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott* (London: Continuum 2007); Deborah Yaffe, *Among the Janeites* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); *Uses of Austen: Jane’s Afterlives*, ed. Gillian Dow and Clare Hanson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Felicity James, ‘At Home with Jane: Placing Austen in contemporary Culture’, in *Uses of Austen*, ed. Dow and Hanson, 132-153; Gabrielle Malcolm, ‘Darcymania’, *Fan Phenomena: Jane Austen*, ed. G. Malcolm (Intellect Books, 2015), 72-83.

³ With one exception, an obituary in the *Positivist Review* published on 1 August 1917.

The thirteen 1817 obituaries consulted were all factual and short, saying when she died and who her father had been.⁴ The majority were in local papers, and six mentioned that she was a writer. *The Hampshire Chronicle and Courier* for example noted: ‘Winchester, Saturday, July 19th. Died, yesterday, in College-street, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of the late Rev. George Austen, formerly Rector of Steventon, in this county.’ Further afield, the *London Chronicle* similarly noted: ‘Died. Lately at Winchester, Miss Jane Austen, daughter of the late Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon.’ Even in a non-local context then, her authorship was not necessarily the main point to mention about her. By contrast, *The London Courier and Evening Gazette* noted:

Died. On the 18th inst. at Winchester, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of the late Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon, in Hampshire, and the Authoress of *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. Her manners were most gentle; her affections ardent, her candour was not to be surpassed, and she lived and died as became a humble Christian. (*The London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 22 July 1817)

The Salisbury and Winchester Journal reproduced this wording exactly, while *The Hampshire Telegraph* and *The Sussex Chronicle* abbreviated it, but also appear to have based their notices on *The Courier*’s. The national periodicals *The Monthly Magazine*, *The New Monthly Magazine* and *The Gentleman’s Magazine* also mentioned her death, though again these notices appear based on *The Courier*’s, given the order in which the novels are listed: ‘July 18. At Winchester, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon, Hants, authoress of “*Emma*”, “*Mansfield Park*”, “*Pride and Prejudice*”, and “*Sense and Sensibility*”’ (*Gentleman’s Magazine*, August 1817). *The Gentleman’s Magazine* gives no further detail, despite having discussed *Emma* favourably in September 1816, and being about to review *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in July 1818. (This same issue that mentions Austen’s death in one sentence contained an obituary notice of the immensely famous Madame de Stael that occupied over three pages.⁵)

⁴ Eleven 1817 obituaries have been reproduced by David Gilson in his monumental *Bibliography of Jane Austen*, 470-71 (1997). The additional two were published in: *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* (30 July 1817) and *Oxford University and City Herald* (2 August 1817).

⁵ See also Gilson, 471.

1817 obituaries are short, factual, and give her identity as being a rector's daughter, with just under half of the obituaries mentioning that she was a writer, and listing the four titles in print at the time of her death. All four novels had appeared anonymously, and periodicals making the connection between author and her work shows some level of significance attached to her writing. However, where notices give any more information than name, parentage and works authored, these additions centre on her character, not on her novels or her authorship.

The contemporary reviews that appeared between 1812 and 1821 for all of her novels (except *Mansfield Park* which was not reviewed by any contemporary periodicals), served a different purpose to the obituaries of 1817, 1917, and 2017, and were by their nature concerned with analysis of the texts. While this chapter focuses on obituaries as indicators of cultural status, the reviews, as contemporary public engagements with Austen's texts, aimed at general readers, still serve as samples of early nineteenth-century views on Austen's texts, and cultural assumptions about novels, both of which can usefully be related to points raised about Austen and her texts at the centenary and bicentenary to highlight the developments of different cultural engagements with Austen and her texts.⁶

Novels in the early nineteenth century were not highly regarded. The genre was seen as female-dominated, both in terms of authors and readers, which contributed to its low literary status (and, as Peter Garside has shown, novel-authorship was indeed dominated by women in the period).⁷ For a novel to be reviewed at all in contemporary periodicals was already an achievement as critics preferred to focus on genres of higher status, such as history, travelogues/travel writing, or biography. The fact that all of Austen's novels, bar *Mansfield Park*, were reviewed, and positively, is one indication of her novels' higher-than-average (though by no means superlative) status. Austen's novels were seen as 'amusing, inoffensive and well-principled' (*The British Critic* July 1816, p.96), containing useful lessons especially for the 'fair reader' (*The Monthly Review*, July 1816, p.320). The genre's perceived femininity meant that reviewers – almost all of whom were male – did not usually deem intellectual instruction possible, which led to a focus on moral instruction. In line with their generally approving

⁶ For a discussion of contemporary reviews of Austen's novels, see Bautz. *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott*, 16-23.

⁷ Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era: Consolidation and Dispersal', in *The English Novel 1770-1829*, ed. Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schoewerling, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 2.15-103, 74.

verdicts, reviewers often emphasised the moral lessons of the novel they discuss, such as Marianne being seen as moving away from her ‘delirium of sensibility’ (*The Critical Review* 1812, p.153), or the ‘excellent lesson [that] may be learned from the elopement of Lydia: - the work also shows the folly of letting young girls have their own way’ (*The Critical Review* March 1813, p.323). Reviews placed the novels in a firmly female sphere, with both author and heroines staying within the boundaries of female propriety. The novels’ ‘unexceptionable tendency’ (*The British Critic*, Feb 1813, p.189) means they provide ‘harmless amusement’ (*The Monthly Review*, 1816, p.320). Reviewers see the author as writing about topics within her range, emphasising the novels’ realism as faithful imitation of familiar scenes, scenes that must have happened ‘to half the families in the United Kingdom’ (*The British Critic* 1818, 297). They see the recognisability of the scenes she describes to her readers as part of Austen’s appeal. The main concerns in contemporary reviews then are moral instruction, realism, and amusement, within a feminine sphere.

In the early nineteenth century, Austen’s novels enjoyed a higher-than-average status, but, as both reviews and obituaries testify, this popularity was not superlative. Obituaries are short and factual, and not concerned with her as an author, while reviews are steadily positive, and discuss the novels always in gendered terms.

1917

By 1917, Austen was widely acknowledged as one of the nation’s greatest authors. The growth in the formal study of literature and her appearance in syllabi and literary histories, the interest in her displayed by prominent academics and writers, the development of the Janeite phenomenon, the large numbers and varying kinds of editions of her texts available, testified and contributed to both her status and popularity.⁸ The centenary of her death was commemorated in the national press, and obituaries took for granted that she was part of the canon.⁹ Three main themes dominate in articles:

⁸ On Austen at the turn of the twentieth century, see e.g. Devoney Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen*; Brian Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, 1870-1940. (London: Routledge 1987); Deidre Lynch, ed. *Janeites*, ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012); Katie Halsey, *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786-1945* (London: Anthem, 2012); Annika Bautz, ‘Austen’s late-nineteenth-century afterlives: 1890s introductions to her novels’, *Women’s Writing*, 25.4 (2018); and Clare Harman, *Jane’s Fame*.

⁹ On Austen and canonisation in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the influence, among others, of George Saintsbury, Walter Raleigh and A. C. Bradley, see, for example: Brian Southam, ‘Introduction’, in

- a) Austen's life and the ways in which it informs her novels;
- b) the nature of her genius;
- c) her texts in the context of the current war.

All these themes are inflected by contemporary views on gender.

a) Austen's life and novels

1917 centenary obituaries of Austen tend not to distinguish her life and her novels clearly, often seeing the former immediately reflected in the latter.¹⁰ Articles emphasise her as young and as a lady, sometimes even in the title ('Jane Austen. The Novels of a Young Lady.' *Birmingham Daily Post* 18 July 1917). She is seen as a 'modest and retiring lady novelist' who wrote 'without the incentives of poverty, or desire for fame, or envy' (*Reading Mercury* 21 July 1917). This way of presenting Austen shows her not to have been a professional writer but a lady who chose to spend some of her time writing, but without being weighed down by worry, need, or even intellect: she wrote as she saw life, she was 'unlearned and uninformed' (*Leeds Mercury* 18 July 1917) and 'not essentially a deep reader... she loved to browse in a novel' (*Reading Mercury*). Her letters dealt with the 'trivial' (*Fortnightly Review* 261), representing the series of unimportant events that made up the life of an early-nineteenth-century country lady as it is presented here.

The majority of articles produced in this year emphasise her as embodying a conservative ideal of femininity, which includes seeing her as not giving importance to her writing, but focussing on her family. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* states that 'she was a human being before she was a woman of intellect, the adored aunt of boisterous nephews and nieces rather than a blue stocking'. Articles emphasise her as 'good-looking' (*Positivist Review*, p.181), at times describing her physical appearance,¹¹ and linking it to her not having been a 'bookish blue stocking', so that she would have made 'an ideal wife ... for any cultured man of the world, being distinctly pretty and sunny natured' (*Fortnightly Review*, p.260). Her 'sweetness of disposition' (*The Graphic*, 21 July 1917) ensured that she was always ladylike in her behaviour:

Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, vol. 2; and Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: how Austen conquered the world* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009).

¹⁰ Austen will 'always be regarded as one of the most attractive and interesting characters in the literature of our country' (*Newcastle Journal*, 18 July 1917).

¹¹ E.g., 'a tall, slender brunette, with bright hazel eyes'; *Positivist Review*, 1 August 1917, 181.

‘that she ever gave vent to her feelings we instinctively know to be untrue’ (*Fortnightly Review* 261).

Her novels are seen as the fitting products of the woman so described. Her books reflect ‘the quiet, gentle, beautiful, rural life of the authoress’ (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1917): articles link this limited and beautiful life, devoid of events and sorrow, to the limited, beautiful and gendered sphere of her novels.

b) Nature of her Genius

While Austen’s status as a great canonical writer is beyond doubt in 1917 obituaries, almost always, that greatness is qualified by gender relativism: she is described as ‘one of our few great women novelists’ (*Evening Dispatch*, 18 July 1917). Connected to her femininity is the view of her as an unconscious genius. She wrote easily, with ‘no conscious art in her writing’, moving ‘with absolute, and at the same time, unconscious surety’ (*Leeds Mercury*). The novels are the products of genius, but the author was not a professional writer, and ‘did not take her writing too seriously’ (*Graphic*). To support the view of her writing casually and as a pastime, several articles emphasise that she had no study and wrote secretly. The limitations of her genius are gendered, in the plots and breadth of her novels, but also in their minute perfection and a ‘style ... so feminine that few styles are easier to read’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*), leaving some readers wanting something ‘a little more robust and energetic’ at the same time as acknowledging that her works as ‘immortal’, with immortality itself being limited in its appeal (*Reading Mercury*).¹² Austen’s feminine genius, by implication then, is distinct from masculine genius in its scope, intellect, and professionalism (such as for example Scott or Dickens). That the novels are works of genius is not disputed however, nor is Austen’s place in the canon. Articles tend to make generalised statements rather than give detailed analysis of the texts in order to show what makes her works those of a genius. Largely without giving examples, the aspects most frequently given as Austen’s hallmarks are firstly, realism, and secondly, a calm benevolent humour. Articles note that ‘the marvel’ about her novels is the way that everyday life is made interesting, not the love affairs (*Leeds Mercury*). Austen is a ‘painter of ordinary life’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*), whose work is

¹² ‘...but to live with the immortals is sometimes an arduous task for mere humanity, and there is no doubt that the air of the novels is a somewhat rarefied air, and one difficult to be breathed by all’ (*Reading Mercury*).

concerned with ‘normal people’ (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*) and the ‘smaller phases of life, and existence is mainly made up of these smaller events’ (*Newcastle Journal*). Articles credit her with inventing the realistic novel of domestic life (*Evening Dispatch* 18 July 1917), which in its current popular form owes everything to her (*Liverpool Daily Post*).

Humour does not come up as often as realism but where it does, the majority of articles take pains to make clear that this humour is suited to the retiring young lady novelist they are depicting. ‘Miss Austen does not set up as satirist’ (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*), she has ‘nothing of the cynic’ about her (*Fortnightly Review* 262). Where her humour is seen as venturing into the satiric, articles emphasise its gentleness: her satire is ‘slight but perceptible; it contains a sting but has little or no poison; it does not assault the reader on every side’ (*Reading Observer*); her irony is ‘subtle and gracious’ (*Birmingham Daily Post*). The majority of articles see her novels as the fitting products of the kind of woman they depict.

There are exceptions to this way of portraying her, notably in periodicals supporting women’s suffrage. Both Bertha Brewster in *Votes for Women*, and L. B. O’Malley in *The Common Cause*, argue for Austen and her heroines as akin to their view of modern women, with ‘very independent minds’ (*Common Cause*, 20 July 1917) and ‘robust common sense’ (*Votes for Women*): Austen does not expect ‘a very different standard of conduct from men and women’ (*Votes for Women*, 3 August 1917), and her heroines ‘would have been Suffragists’ (*Common Cause*). Devoney Looser’s analysis of men’s clubs, on the one hand, and suffragists’ engagement with Austen, on the other, concludes: ‘Where the men’s clubs Janeites saw in Austen a safe, admirably domestic figure whose life and writings were often seen as without political intention, the suffragists’ Austen was almost always cast as a rebel’ (165).¹³ However, while differing views of Austen and her texts co-exist in the early twentieth century, the version of Austen that dominates by far in general assessments of her and her works as expressed in newspapers and consumed by the general public, is that of a conservatively feminine and therefore safe, unintellectual lady-novelist, whose quiet and peaceful life is reflected in her writings.

As obituaries, written by non-specialists, articles are not primarily concerned with textual analysis, and detailed knowledge of either novels or author is often lacking. S. Mais claims, for example, that ‘after *Pride and Prejudice*, in popular estimation, comes *Mansfield Park*’

¹³ For Looser’s discussion of suffragists and Austen, see *Making of Jane Austen*, 164-177.

(*Fortnightly Review* 264). Similarly, *The Globe* states that Austen's 'dainty heroines, following the elegant fashion of their day, demonstrated their 'sense and sensibility' by falling into a swoon upon the smallest provocation. Many of her scenes were laid in Bath, where she was a constant visitor.' The *Newcastle Journal* makes assumptions about women and publishing that the writer applies to Austen:

As has been the case with so many of our great writers, especially with the women who have adorned the ranks of our novelists, Jane Austen found much difficulty in securing publication of her tales. ... she ... lived to the age of 80, she was within six years of her death when her first work was placed before the public.' (*Newcastle Journal*).

As in 2017, and in contrast to 1817 reviews, 1917 articles evidence cultural assumptions about Austen that are often not based on readings of the novels. The main points raised in 1917 newspapers are realism and humour, both connected to a view of the author and her heroines as conservative, and of Austen as an unconscious non-professional genius. The most significant development compared to 1817 reviews and obituaries is that she is now unequivocally regarded as a genius, but the 1917 view sees her as an unconscious genius, defined in gendered terms, who wrote more by accident than design, not professionally and not for financial reasons. By 1917, Austen has become a cultural construct that can be written about without relying on knowledge of the novels.

c) Reading her in context of war

Newspaper obituaries on Austen in July 1917 appear amidst other items of news, dominated by those relating to the war. On the same page as the article on Jane Austen in *The Aberdeen Daily Journal* (p.2), for example, appear items on 'Name of the Royal House: Adoption of Windsor', on 'Northern Casualties', a report on crime rates in Scotland in 1916, a notice on new orders relating to hay and straw, and 'increase in landing and value' in Scottish fisheries. In *The Birmingham Daily Post* of 18 July 1917, the article on 'Jane Austen. 'The Novels of a Young Lady'' appears on the same page as an article on 'Hint of another war loan', several articles relating to U-Boats ('German faith in the U-Boat War', 'How submarine menace can be defeated'), 'The nation's food', 'Engineering and shipbuilding trades', 'America's output of ships', 'The North Sea Raid. Germany loses some useful vessels.' (p.8). Similarly, the *Evening Dispatch* commemorates the centenary of Austen's death on its front page, among articles on

‘The King’s name’, ‘Raids in Flanders’, ‘Gains at Verdun’, ‘New Chancellor will face Reichstag. Relying on U-Boats.’, ‘A New Crisis in Russia’, while *The Yorkshire Post* gives ‘Jane Austen’ next to ‘The Royal House. Adoption of the name of Windsor.’ (18 July 1917, p.4), among other news items.

Given this political and material context, it is perhaps not surprising that obituaries comment on what they see as the lack of historical context in Austen’s novels. Articles largely come to the conclusion that her detachment from political events was only possible because the ‘struggle from 1793-1814 was nothing like so serious as the present war’ (*Positivist Review*, p.181), although some note that she ‘did not heed the noise’ because she had strong self-control (*Daily Mirror*). Articles see Austen’s depiction of quiet and peaceful country life, instead of a focus on political context, as contributing to the restorative nature of Austen’s novels. This restorative aspect tends to be gendered, because articles connect it to their readings of both her and her heroines, emphasising her as a ‘lady novelist’ (*Daily Mirror*), and noticing the ‘anomaly’ between ‘the din of war’ and the ‘calm uneventful life of the retiring young woman’ (*Reading Mercury*). The novels’ restorative potential is seen as being enabled through the quiet country life she described in her novels, as well as through the peaceful and quiet life of the author that articles see as informing the novels.

All articles agree that reading Austen’s novels is beneficial, because her ‘quiet novels’ (*Western Morning News*) enable an escape from the present through contemplation of remote, calm and peaceful scenes. Several articles give examples of the health-giving effects on readers; for example, *The Yorkshire Post* tells of a soldier who ‘had to be distracted from his own thoughts’, and although many famous books were tried to amuse him, and had to be closed as too exciting, ‘he listened to each one of Jane Austen’s books with the keenest enjoyment’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 18 July 1917).

In the context of this view of the texts as healing, it is not perhaps surprising that, as noted above, her humour is also seen as gentle, that if satire is noted, it is qualified as ‘contain[ing] a sting but ha[ving] little or no poison’ (*Reading Observer*). Austen’s ‘pen is governed by delicate restraint’ (*Reading Observer*) which ensures the restfulness and charm of each novel (*Sheffield daily telegraph*). Her texts are seen as providing wholesome entertainment (*Leeds Mercury*), akin to the way that Scott’s work had been hailed in the nineteenth century. While Austen’s work was seen as morally unexceptionable by her contemporaries, novel reading

was not regarded as a useful let alone health-giving activity, with Scott being seen as the exception partly because his works were not necessarily classified as novels but as going beyond fiction.¹⁴ Throughout the century, reading Scott's novels was described as giving 'the pleasure of that healthy open-air life, with that manly companion'.¹⁵ While in the early nineteenth century, Austen's limited social significance and scope was one of the factors that meant her novels could never be truly great, a hundred years later, she has become one of the great. However, while her genius was now beyond dispute, it was also firmly gendered. Perhaps paradoxically, it is her limited scope connected to femininity, together with a conservative reading of the texts, their heroines, and the author, that means her works are seen as safe, and as having the power to calm, heal and restore.

The centenary of her death was noted in the national papers in a way that linked her authorship with her gender and class, and, in the majority of articles, in a way that evoked a conservative image of femininity as well as acknowledging her superiority among female writers as 'the refined and graceful archetype of [a] race of lady novelists' (*Globe* 12 July 1917). The lack of detail about either texts or author that the articles evidence suggests that the writers of articles were not usually very familiar with Austen's texts. Their insistence on a female genius who was not a professional writer and lived the retiring life of a country lady, a life that is reflected in her novels that depict safely conservative heroines, therefore emphasises Austen's status in broader culture. By 1917, she was known for having written novels that are restorative, calm and peaceful, but this cultural construct was no longer based on knowledge of her texts.

2017

By 2017, Austen's cultural status had become superlative. In bicentenary obituary articles, the most commonly discussed concerns are the author's life, particularly as a woman in the early nineteenth century, and, in relation to her novels, gender, humour and realism.

1) Austen the woman

As in 1817 and 1917, Austen's gender informs readings of both her as a person and her novels in 2017 too. However, in 1817 and 1917, the femininity she was associated with as embodying and

¹⁴ See Bautz, *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott*, 7-45.

¹⁵ Leslie Stephen, 'Some Words about Sir Walter Scott', *Cornhill Magazine*, 24, September 1871, xxiv, 278-93. Reprinted in *Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 439-58 (458).

as propagating through her heroines was largely conservative, emphasising genteel, lady-like behaviour within what was regarded as proper feminine boundaries. By 2017, gender dominates views at least as much as in 1817 and 1917, but now both author and heroines are seen as either feminists or highly independent and progressive women, whose views accord more easily with those of the twenty-first century than those of the author's own time. Articles present Austen as a professional writer, having 'eschewed wedlock in favour of her career' (*Belfast Telegraph*), who earned her living by her writing (*Newcastle Journal*, 18/7/2017). She 'was a bit of a ladette in her younger years' (*Independent*, 18 July 2017), having had a 'strong feminist streak... long before feminists were acknowledged or even existed' (*Newcastle Journal*, 18 July 2017).

Articles often lack biographical knowledge, and in its stead, the fact that she was a writer is seen as unusual, often feminist, and framed in terms of a deliberate career. In contrast to 1917's views of writing as the leisured activity of a lady, in 2017 she is seen as earning her living by her pen, acting 'as her own agent, negotiating with her publishers' (*Belfast Telegraph*). Articles want to see her as a self-conscious writer, and self-assured: that she had 'a quiet self-confidence in her own brilliance seems likely' (*Sunday Express*, 16 July 2017). Her writing career is presented as her choice over convention. At the same time, articles note her love life, some acknowledging that it has been 'the subject of speculation, conjecture, and wishful thinking' (*The Times*, 15 July 2017), others stating that she 'enjoyed flirting' (*Scottish Express*, 8 July 2017), implying or explicitly stating that her not marrying was her choice. The *Mid Devon Gazette* connects life and novels overtly: 'her life was lived like the plot of one of her novels, filled with lost loves, mysterious death and poetic irony' (*Mid Devon Gazette*, 18 July 2017), showing the article's author's general idea of novels, rather than knowledge of Austen's texts (or even adaptations) or her life. Overall, in terms of biography, the view that emerges from articles is that of Austen as a self-conscious, professional writer.

2) Novels

The three things that newspaper articles of July 2017 most frequently see the novels as being about are a) women, b) humour, and c) realism.

a) Gender

Articles describe the novels as being ‘all about women’, centring on ‘women’s lives and difficulties, some of which are with us still’ (Wendy Holden, *Sunday Express*, 16 July 2017). Holden goes on to give the example of Lydia’s unconventionality, whose elopement, Holden argues, is endorsed by the author because Lydia is ‘allowed to marry the man she loves’. The unconventionality of Austen’s heroines comes up repeatedly as what attracts twenty-first century (female) readers to the texts. Discussing *Pride and Prejudice*, Deborah Moggach states,

I love the novel, ... because it’s so sexy. ... It also gives hope to every young woman who might not be blessed with great beauty – in other words, most of us. For true attraction is not to be found in perfect features but in wit, intelligence and a fine disregard for received opinions.

Deborah Moggach, interviewed by Alison Pearson in *The Sunday Telegraph* (16 July 2017).

Elizabeth is seen as embodying twenty-first-century views of femininity. Her story has become a modern fairy tale that is acknowledged as truth: wit, intelligence and unconventionality are presented as the basis of sexual attraction. Where Austen is seen as ‘cynic[al] about sexual desire’, this is again related to women and careers: ‘A woman’s life, [Austen] believes, is not the stuff of three-decker romances; we are worth more than the sum of our emotions. ... [Marianne becoming] patroness of a village is nothing to be scoffed at: it’s as near as dammit a political career’ (Frances Wilson, *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 2017). These readings of Austen’s texts link the heroines to twenty-first-century femininity, with a focus on nonconformity and career. In 2017, of fifteen obituaries that carry a byline, seven were written by men and eight by women, which suggests that the views expressed in the articles are less reflective of an article author’s gender and more generally of our culture’s understanding of her. In both examples cited above, the article’s author is female, and writes for a female implied reader, relating to Austen’s heroines through the female readers’ own experiences. This is in notable contrast to 1817 and 1917 assessments, where in most cases, Austen’s heroines are written about by men, for implied male readers.¹⁶ Assessments of Austen’s heroines then have changed to align with article writers’

¹⁶ For example, when *The Daily Mirror* in 1917 states that Austen’s ‘‘fair females’ were like ours’ (*Daily Mirror*, 18 July 1917).

cultural contexts, as has the gender distribution of article writers and assumptions about the readership of both novels and articles about Austen.

b) Humour

Early nineteenth-century readers of Austen did not usually comment on the novels' humour. The novels were seen as morally unexceptionable, and where humour came up its gentleness was emphasised. *The British Critic* in an 1818 review of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* stated that Austen

never dips her pen in satire; the follies which she holds up are ... mere follies, ... and she treats them, as such, with good-humoured pleasantry, mimicking them so exactly that we always laugh at the ridiculous truth of the imitation, but without ever being incited to indulge in feelings, that might render us ill-natured or intolerant in society. (*The British Critic* on *NA&P*, March 1818, 293–301, 298)

The reviewer emphasised the novels' benevolence, and also Austen's gender through the repeated use of the pronoun, which reinforces the view of the author and her texts as gentle. By 1917, humour had come to be one of the main aspects that was noted about Austen and her texts. Most writers insisted that hers was a 'quiet humour' (*Evening Dispatch*, 18 July 1917), one that suited the way the majority of 1917 articles portrayed the author. By 2017, humour had maintained a position as one of the main tropes Austen is connected with; in fact, it is often the first aspect that comes up in discussions. Even where writers of articles do not appear to be acquainted with the novels, or lack detailed knowledge, they associate Austen with humour and satire. For example, *The Birmingham Evening Mail* states that 'Jane Austen's use of biting irony, along with her realism and social commentary have since earned her great and historical importance to critics and scholars' (18 July 2017). In contrast to 1817 and 1917 readings, in the twenty-first century, her humour is no longer gentle but described as 'savage satire' (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 17) or 'biting wit' (*Independent*, 22 July 2017): the novels' author is not seen as a genteel and retiring young lady, but a mature woman who satirises aspects of the society she lives in, through 'biting social commentary' (*Independent*, 18 July 2017). Where the previous two centuries took pains to emphasise the gentleness, the twenty-first century sees her as socially critical, particularly of gender limitations, connecting her wit and satire to feminism.

c) Realism

Articles also connect realism to feminism. Writers comment on the way that marriage is explored in the novels, as an economic and social necessity for women, rather than ‘empty romance’ (*Guardian* 16 July 2017). Ending her heroines’ stories in marriage is therefore not ‘a facile depiction of a fairy-tale ending’ but a depiction of reality for women at a time where the alternatives to marriage were ‘penury, dependency on relatives, or virtual slavery as a lady’s companion’ (*Belfast Daily Telegraph*). Writing about women in a realistic mode in itself then becomes an act of feminism. Connected to what articles read as realistic depictions of early-nineteenth-century life are comments on the author’s wisdom. At times, articles link her ‘pure wit and wisdom’ (*Birmingham Evening Mail*), or ‘neverending wit and wisdom’ (*Sunday Telegraph*) to one another, emphasising both the novels’ social commentary and humour, but also the applicability of Austen’s views to today’s lives. Her novels can be read for advice, because she ‘understood something that has escaped so many writers’ (Deborah Moggach, cited by Alison Pearson). Alison Pearson in *The Sunday Telegraph* notes that ‘Her imperishable wisdom is an antidote to any idiocy on the evening news’ (16 July 2017). While her wisdom is applicable to twenty-first-century life, it also allows the novels to be read as an escape from twenty-first-century reality.

By 2017, Austen has attained celebrity status. Places want to be associated with her. For example, Austen is described as a ‘former Reading schoolgirl’, and the school may have had ‘huge influence on her writing’ (*Get Reading*, 18 July 2017); another article explores potential connections with Bristol, suggesting that

It is also possible that Jane Austen would have seen The Grove, in Brislington, the main part of which still stands at the top of Bristol Hill. Also dating from the 1790s the house stands near the Bath Road where Austen would have travelled on several occasions. (*Bristol Post*, 18 July 2017)

An eighteenth-century garden claims that Austen’s novels ‘often revealed a love of the English landscape garden, a feeling echoed in her personal life too’, using this to hold an Austen-themed special event (*Get Surrey*, 18 July 2018).

Frequently, knowledge of the novels and their author is vague, and writers do not necessarily expect their readers to know the novels. For example, *The Scottish Express* explains that ‘Austen fans are called Janeites and included the Prince Regent’ (*Scottish Express*, 8 July 2017), while the *Mail Online* explains that ‘Mark Darcy [is] the book’s heart-throb and eventual husband of protagonist Elizabeth Bennet’ and Caroline Bingley is ‘an antagonist in the famous novel’ (*Mail Online*, 18 July 2017). Darcy here acquires the first name of the protagonist of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, showing how Austen’s novels and their spin offs mix in contemporary culture.

While newspaper articles make hardly any explicit links to scholarly assessments of Austen, arguably the most dominant force in both critical and popular writing on Austen is feminism. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has stated, ‘the attractive and persuasive reading of Austen’s work that such a radical feminist approach proposed... makes it difficult for us today to regard Jane Austen as anything other than a *woman* writer’.¹⁷ While newspaper articles are rarely based on readings of the novels, Austen is always written about as a woman novelist, and as advocating women’s independence in line with 21st-century ideas. Critics and article writers respond to Austen as part of their cultural context. The feminist lens influences views of other dominant themes, perhaps most significantly humour, both because it dominates twenty-first-century assumptions of what Austen is about, and because assessments of Austen’s humour have developed substantially over the centuries, in line with views of her as a female author. Austen is now seen as a professional writer; a witty, wise, and independently minded, female and feminist, social commentator.

Conclusion

This essay has explored cultural assumptions about Austen at three points over 200 years, discussing what Austen was associated with in 1817, 1917, and 2017, and whether these associations were based on her life, her novels, adaptations or other spin-offs. Two main differences between each period’s version of Austen have emerged: assessments of gender in relation to both Austen’s life and her novels, and views of her humour. Furthermore, the varying levels of her popularity over the three periods, while rarely discussed as a phenomenon,

¹⁷ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ‘Critical responses, recent’, in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 101-110, 102.

significantly influence readings in each period. By 1917, her fame and her status as a canonical author are beyond dispute, by 2017, her cultural status has become superlative.

Views on her humour have changed substantially over the last 200 years. While in 1817 it was not discussed, by 1917 newspapers brought it into their assessments of Austen, but always framed it as a gentle and benevolent sense of fun. By 2017, however, it had become one of the most important aspects with which Austen was associated, and by then her humour was seen as biting, satirical, and feminist.

Newspapers' views on gender and Austen have also undergone significant shifts. At all three points in time that this chapter is concerned with, gender informs how author and novels are viewed. In 1817, female authorship limits the intellectual and cultural significance of the novels. In 1917, she is seen as a retiring lady-novelist, an unconscious genius whose heroines are safely conservative. While suffragists' views differ in terms of Austen and her heroines, the dominant view by far is that of a calm, leisured lady writer, who is not a 'bookish blue stocking' (*Fortnightly Review*, 257). By contrast, in the bicentenary articles of the twenty-first century, newspapers present her as self-aware and self-assured, a socially critical feminist, who chooses to be a professional writer, and who writes about women's lives and situations in a progressive and satirical way.

Realism is also an aspect that articles in all three time periods raise. In 1817, reviewers note the recognisability of the scenes to readers. In 1917, and also in 2017, the realistic depiction of early nineteenth-century life remains one of Austen's hallmarks and, in both periods, is linked to a reading of her novels that escapes the respective contemporary reality, although in different ways: in 1917, it is expressed as a more straightforward yearning for a simpler time that is capable of not taking heed of the war and life's complexities, whereas in 2017, the novels are read as an escape from twenty-first-century reality but at the same time, the female author's wit and wisdom, and that of her heroines, renders the texts applicable to contemporary lives.

The exploration of obituary articles has shown how Austen is viewed in popular culture at three different points over two hundred years. It has also shown that while the ways in which author and text are viewed differ, some of the same main themes are discussed in connection with her; most prominently gender and realism. Author and texts are appropriated by each culture in ways that reveal the receiving culture's priorities and values, showing on the one hand the texts' adaptability, and on the other, the significance of cultural context to acts of reading,

consuming and constructing of cultural status. Half of the obituaries published in 1817 do not mention that Austen was a writer, but contemporary reviews are necessarily based on the novels. By 1917, views are partly based on the novels but also on cultural constructs of what Austen had come to mean. By 2017, while there are some newspaper articles that are based on the novels and their spin-offs, what Austen has come to stand for in popular culture is largely independent of the novels.

