

## Book Review

*Jane Austen: A Style in History.* Chris Yelland. Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 9781138489035, 224 pp.

As is often noted by reviewers, Jane Austen continues to attract a vast (and ever-expanding) body of criticism. Recently, historicist and stylistic approaches have both emerged as particularly popular methodologies in Austen studies. Chris Yelland's monograph successfully unites these superficially incongruent fields; by taking an historical approach to the analysis of Austen's style, this book proves that historicist and stylistic readings can be mutually informative. *Jane Austen: A Style in History* is therefore a valuable addition not only to Austen studies but also to broader methodological discussions in literary studies.

Yelland sheds new light on Austen's prose by providing a stylistic analysis which is rooted in the historical context in which Austen's novels were produced and received. Three historical issues are prioritised: Austen's inheritance from the eighteenth-century, the development of her own style between 1811 and 1817, and her reception by the Victorians. The central argument is that orality and reading aloud were crucial to the development of Austen's style. This conclusion is supported by extensive analyses of quotations from Austen's prose, and Yelland also considers the historical context of her stylistic choices. This thesis is clearly maintained across the seven chapters, but the clarity of the work may have benefited further from the chapters being

grouped into labelled sections, for example, prescriptivism, orality, narration, and reception, which emerge as key foci.

The importance of prescriptivism as an influence on Austen's style is the subject of the first chapter, 'Prescriptivism, Perspicuity and the Female Reader and Writer'. This prescriptivist inheritance is more visible in Austen's lexis than in her syntax. Further specific examples are provided in Chapter 2, 'Abstraction, Synonymy and Metaphor in Jane Austen's Lexis'. Yelland notes Austen's perspicuity, even in emotional scenes in her novels, which he judges as equating to a quality of 'hardness or exactness' (p. 30). The criticism that Austen's avoidance of metaphor betrays a lack of imagination is successfully refuted: Austen makes the stylistic choice not to use them.

The central chapter of this monograph, both in terms of innovative analysis and significance in Yelland's overall thesis, is Chapter 3, which discusses the influence of reading aloud on Austen's style. Yelland argues engagingly and persuasively that audiobook versions of the novels can be useful for academic study, where previously they have been generally disregarded by the vast majority of critics. Based on an analysis of audiobook performances, Yelland finds that readings of Austen's novels are inherently 'expressive' but not 'mimetic' (p. 75). Orality was a crucial part of Austen's process and stylistic development. The context of reading aloud in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century is also discussed, in the Austen family as well as in her novels.

The following chapters provide close analysis of Austen's use of narration and speech. Free indirect discourse, free indirect thought, and free indirect speech are all considered. In Chapter 4, 'Jane Austen and Johnsonian Syntax', Yelland argues that Austen engaged in the 'feminisation of Johnsonian syntax' (p. 120), focusing on her use of relative clauses in narration and speech. This analysis provides new evidence supporting the claim that there is a clear distinction visible between Austen's Steventon and Chawton novels. Chapter 5 considers Austen's 'Experiments with Speech and Thought'. Throughout her career, Austen increasingly uses a hybrid of direct and indirect speech. Yelland argues that Austen's increasing use of free indirect discourse is attributable to the influence of orality. This is clearly demonstrated in

Chapter 6, 'Jane Austen and Free Indirect Discourse: A Developmental Account', which traces changes in her use of the technique over time. The non-linear development of Austen's use of free indirect discourse is evidenced by readings of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

The final chapter, 'The Victorian (Re)Construction of Jane Austen – and a Coda' provides a different approach to the combination of stylistic and historicist methodologies. Yelland argues that the Victorians rejected Austen's eighteenth-century influences, while enjoying her novels' suitability for oral performance. The influence of this oral quality on Austen's style is central to Yelland's thesis. Austen's work developed significantly throughout her career due to both print and oral influences, which explains why she is seen to be a 'transitional' writer (p. 206).

Yelland successfully situates Austen's style in its historical context. An emphasis of the dual importance of print culture influences and oral culture is maintained throughout. The historicist readings could be improved by additional discussion of the broader context in which Austen was writing. Although Yelland claims to contextualise Austen, extensive comparison of her style with that of her contemporaries (including less well-remembered writers) would have enabled the reader to appreciate Austen's innovation more fully. While the strength of this monograph lies in the close analysis of quotations, in line with its stylistic approach, this precise examination could allow the reader to lose a sense of the bigger picture of why Austen's style is particularly noteworthy. However, this minute focus is the result of the methodology which is also Yelland's innovation: the combination of stylistics and historiography, which makes this monograph a useful new contribution which stands out in a crowded field. *Jane Austen: A Style in History* would make informative reading not only for students and scholars of Austen, but also stylists and historicist critics more broadly, due to its contribution to the literary history of style.

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