Freya Johnston, *Jane Austen: Early and Late*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 296. £35.00. ISBN 9780691198002.

Freya Johnston's study dispenses with the view that Jane Austen's three-decade long career had distinct early, middle, and late phases. The missing 'middle' in the title reflects its near disappearance in the book, since a careful reappraisal of the compositional timeline belies such forward-moving segmentation. Even as a published author, Austen returned to her unpublished writing to reread and revise it. Therefore, Johnston's analysis, attending to both 'early' and 'late', proposes an 'early-late' view by deftly interweaving Austen's manuscript and published works, letters, and marginalia (150). The persistence of certain aspects throughout Austen's career —among others, 'the freakish and satirical elements' (142) —render tenuous not only the narrative of an early, middle, and late novelist, but also the 'traditional distinction between her unpublished and published works' (87). Johnston contends with field-defining critics who were neither as captivated by Austen's 'authorial beginnings' as they were by her mature work, nor intent upon finding value in them (95). This revisionary approach builds on Johnston's collaboration with Kathryn Sutherland as editors of Austen's *Teenage Writings* (2017). While Sutherland notes that, in the manuscripts, earlier and later drafts appear to be 'compacted into one', Johnston similarly sets out to blur established lines, separating early from late, published from unpublished (17).

The six chapters (followed by images of Austen's annotated copy of Goldsmith's *History of England*) consider questions of authorial and character development in relation to editorial choices, genre and publishability, rereading and repeating with a difference, humour in the face of grief and mortality, novelistic historiography, and the relationship between parts and the whole. Compared to other recent monographs by Princeton UP, the introduction offers little orientation regarding the book's associative method, the structure of its argument, or the ordering of chapters that are neither signposted by section titles nor expository paragraphs. Although unorthodox, this practice yields an exciting reading experience thanks to the surprisingly elastic connections that Johnson establishes across chronological barriers, while maintaining a firm grip on biographical material. Each chapter takes as its entry point a specific work, a title designating a portion of Austen's manuscripts ('Effusions of Fancy' for 'Volume the Third'), Austen's last poem, a phrase like the much-quoted opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, or merely a gerund (in the chapter 'Developing'). These beginnings function as both portals and pathways into the web of inter- and intratextuality spun by every chapter. They captivate critical attention, structurally validating the book's larger claim about career-long stylistic and thematic continuities that defy the narrative about Austen evolving from lesser beginnings to grand, mature writing. Once I could discern the method underlying the book, I could also recognise that it justified Johnston's equal attention to manuscript and published writings. Strikingly, the very density and frequent brilliancy of these webbed chapters create a mismatch between critical skills and the argument they promote or seek to debunk. The view refuted by this book—that 'early work necessarily yields to later, better things'—has been effectively called into question for a good while now (33). From the last thirty years of the twentieth century onwards, a steady scholarly counterflow has asserted the undiminished value of Austen's beginnings, revisions, and career-spanning interests. Therefore, while there are a great many new insights in the book, they serve a somewhat underwhelming thesis. Could other roads have been more productive? I phrase this as a question inspired by Johnston's thought-provoking use of the interrogative mood.

If the roads taken do point out tendencies, this study seems to realign Austen with Augustan legacy, lessening her Romantic affiliations. Johnston hears Austen far more often backchatting with Pope, Johnson, and Swift than dialoguing with her contemporaries. Among some unaddressed Romantic dialogues, the chapter 'Developing' represents a case in point.

Drawing on two meanings of the verb 'to develop', Johnston discusses authorial and character growth, first, in the sense of change or evolution, and second, in the seventeenth-century sense: development as revelation of an unchanging truth. Amid the backchats, Johnston overlooks Wollstonecraft's claim that, by the end of the eighteenth century, genre and gender had become mutually constitutive. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft critiques novelists for treating female and male development as pertaining to two different species, with only male protagonism made to evolve over narrated time, whereas female protagonism made to reveal itself to readers as fully formed as Minerva from Jupiter's head. Aware of both senses of development, Wollstonecraft notes that the older sense of revelation binds female characters either to timelessness or backwardness.

Nonetheless, Johnston's very method—by refuting a compartmentalised and hierarchical understanding of Austen's early, middle, and late aesthetics as well as by positing continuities between them—enacts the principle of a universal Romantic poesy encompassing Austen's career and each chapter of this study. This is another reason to pick up this book and welcome it for the conversations it generates.

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