Topics in British Literature Before 1800:

Jane Austen

In this course we will read the full range of Jane Austen's extraordinary corpus: her juvenilia, her letters, her unpublished fiction, and of course her six published novels. Austen has always been a well-known and beloved author, but it is only within the last decade or so that she has made the transition from a sort of canonical coterie figure to the cultural mainstream. Triggered by a now-famous adaptation of Pride and Prejudice by the BBC in the mid-1990s, and continuing since then with the release of numerous film adaptations of her novels, Austen's corpus is now a central cultural reference, one with the potential to be as evergreen as Shakespeare's.

Some questions to consider in this class include the following: Why of so many great women novelists is it Austen who has become the dominant figure, culturally more central than even the Brontes, and certainly more so than Eliot or Woolf? Why, too, is it Austen's work that is so amenable to "modern dress" productions of various kinds ("Clueless," "Bridget Jones's Diary," "Bride and Prejudice," and in a sense Patricia Rozema's "Mansfield Park")? (This is certainly another connexion of Austen with Shakespeare, one that I expect will grow in the years to come.) I don't think there is a simple answer to these questions, though, since simply to point to the films as a cause is to beg another question: why is she the novelist so frequently getting filmed? For let's be clear: there are no male novelists, either, whose works are filmed and refilmed with the frequency that hers have been: not Dickens, not Hardy, and certainly not Joyce.

I think that we have to look for the answers to these cultural questions in the writing itself; and that will be the focus of this course: to look closely, and comprehensively, at Austen as a writer. My working assumption for this course--my hypothesis, if you will--is that it is the power of Austen's art that has made her a present-day media star. We will find, for example, that her novels are charged with compelling dialogue. This is very handy for screenplay writers, but it also points to the profoundly mimetic (that is, speech-centred) nature of her art (another connexion with the Bard). We will also look at her use of irony, free indirect discourse, and the epigram, among other literary features, to try to understand her power as a writer. It is true of course that her novels deal with the social (rather than just romantic) standing of women and, in an age of increasing gender equity in public life, that may well be a key factor in her new prominence. But as I hope our reading of Austen will reveal, she is a unique and forceful creator, one whose will to art in language is awe-inspiring and even a little frightening.

Because Austen's development as an artist was essentially complete by the early 1790s, and because her first three novels (Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Northanger Abbey) were drafted before the end of that decade, this course is being offered as a pre-1800 credit. The course is open only to honours English students (Literature or RPW), and has an
enrollment cap of 25 students; as a result, it will be run in a seminar format, and a class-wide discussion of the assigned readings, not professorial lectures or team break-out groups, will be the organizing principle of our meetings.

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Logistics:

Office: Hagey Hall 257, ext. 32416
Office Hours: 1:00-2:00 p.m. Tuesday, or by appointment

Required Texts:
- Jane Austen, *Catharine and Other Writings* (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Sense and Sensibility (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Pride and Prejudice (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Mansfield Park (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Emma (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Persuasion (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Selected Letters (Oxford World’s Classics)

Recommended Texts:
- Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford)

**Important Note:** for class discussions to function smoothly and effectively, it is essential that we all be on the same page in our references to Austen’s texts, so students are required to use the course texts as provided in the Bookstore. Other editions are not acceptable for classroom use in this course. Note too that Oxford has recently issued new editions of Austen’s novels, so if you are buying from somewhere other than the Bookstore, or are buying used copies, it is up to you to make sure that the ISBN number for your Oxford World’s Classic edition is the same as the one listed on the course book order form for the relevant novel.

Assignments:
- Active participation in seminar discussions of the assigned readings on a weekly basis (20%); a 2-page précis of Irvine (5%); a 2-page criticism exercise (10%); a 20-minute group seminar presentation on a set Austen-period novel or on an Austen-related film (your choice = 15%); and a 25-page critical paper (50%).

Seminar presentations will be scheduled by the end of the second week of classes for dates starting in the fifth week of classes; suggestions for novels and films will be circulated.
The 2-page précis of Irvine is due at the start of class on September 21st. The 2-page criticism exercise is due at the start of class on October 5th. The 25-page critical paper is due in the English drop-box no later than noon on December 5th. Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and fastened with a staple (DO NOT use plastic report folders or other fasteners or covers); if using a word-processor, laser print your paper and do not use right justification. For this course, a page is defined as 250 words; make sure your papers are within the allowed word count. Papers must follow the format for paper presentation, quotations, and references laid out in the latest edition of the MLA Handbook. Late assignments will only be accepted if missed for a documented medical reason. Uncompleted assignments will be graded 0.

Finally, students are expected to follow at all times both university and departmental regulations on plagiarism (in particular, all work apart from group assignments must be your own, and the words and ideas of others must appear within your work inside quotation marks and with complete references in foot- or end-notes).

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and NEVER hand a paper or any other assignment in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.
Jane Austen

SYLLABUS

I. Portrait of the Woman as a Young Artist

September 12 & 14: Introduction: Catharine and Other Writings

September 19 & 21: Catharine and Other Writings (cont.); Lady Susan

September 26 & 28: Selected Letters (though 1810); Northanger Abbey

II. Fiction and Friction

October 3 & 5: Sense and Sensibility

October 10 & 12: Pride and Prejudice

III. Social Rhetorics

October 17, 19, 24 & 26: The Watsons and Mansfield Park

October 31; November 2, 7, & 9: Emma

IV. Romantic Austen

November 14 & 16: Persuasion

November 21 & 23: Selected Letters (from 1811); Sanditon

November 28 & 30: Review