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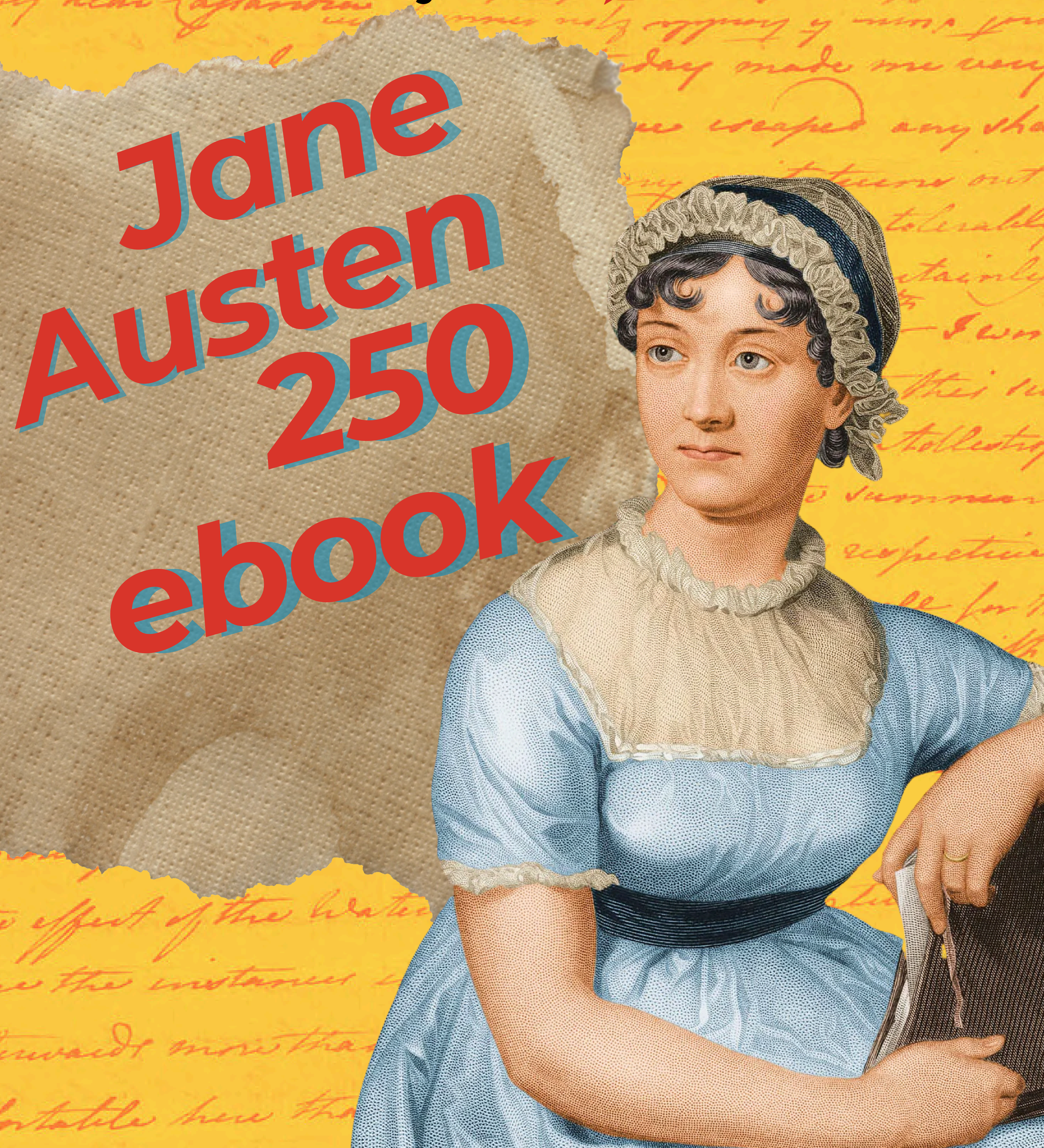
Jane Austen 250 ebook



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Contributors

Authors

Adam J Smith
Associate Professor in 18th-Century Literature, York St John University

Nada Saadaoui
PhD Candidate in English Literature, University of Cumbria

Louise Curran
Lecturer in 18th-Century and Romantic Literature, University of Birmingham

Hillary Burlock
British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History, University of Liverpool

Olivia Robotham Carpenter
Lecturer in Literature, University of York

Amy Wilcockson
Research Fellow, English, Queen Mary University of London

Barbara Cooke
Programme Leader and Senior Lecturer in English, Loughborough University

Ana Fernandez Mosquera
Researcher in Literary Criticism, University of Vigo

Carmen Barajas
Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology, University of Malaga

Noelia López-Montilla
Psychologist and Researcher, University of Malaga

Kerrie Davies
Senior Lecturer, School of the Arts & Media, University of New South Wales Sydney

The Conversation

Anna Walker
Senior Arts & Culture Editor

Jane Wright
Arts & Culture Commissioning Editor

Naomi Joseph
Arts & Culture Editor

Alice Mason
Audience Development Co-ordinator

Alastair Tibbitt
Manager Donations, Partnerships and Audience

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Introduction

Celebrating 250 years of Jane Austen

It is easy to overlook or underestimate the genius of Jane Austen because she is so often judged by contemporary standards. But so imitated are her ideas, characters and plotlines that it would not be overstating things to say she created the template for modern romance novels and romcoms. Her sensibility is so timeless and her themes so universal that we must remind ourselves of the period in which she lived.

Jane Wright
Commissioning Editor Arts & Culture
The Conversation UK

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries women were still chattels; they had little agency or freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Making a "good" marriage was key to a young woman's survival, and love often had little to do with it. Austen used her voice to reveal and reflect the position of women who were capable and intelligent and yet shackled by their sex, their social standing and their lack of freedoms in a world built for men.

She was a feminist long before the word even existed, exposed as a young woman no doubt to the radical ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Through her novels, Austen challenged prevailing assumptions about women as passive, subordinate, of inferior intellect, and critiqued the patriarchal society in which she lived. In doing so she created a range of memorable female characters who are funny, intelligent, spirited – and often flawed.

Satirist, social commentator, chronicler of the heart, Austen observed with a keen eye and sharp wit the social world around her, and then exposed and dissected it in six exquisite novels that have rarely been out of print since her death.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of her birth on December 16 1775. Austen died relatively young at the age of 41 in July 1817. Though she lived to see her work in print, she was never able to enjoy its phenomenal success or have an inkling of the

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place she would occupy in the English literary canon.

To celebrate her extraordinary talent in this special year, The Conversation published a series of articles by Austen experts to complement our six-part podcast, Jane Austen's Paper Trail. In this ebook, you can enjoy ten of those exceptional pieces, ranging from an exploration of Austen the unacknowledged satirist, to a look at the enduring appeal of Austen heartthrobs, an examination of the act of walking as a radical female act, and a glimpse of what you might expect on a night out with Jane Austen at a flirtatious Regency ball.

For a woman whose six novels all ended happily in a love match, many aficionados – the faithful "Janeites" – find it sad that the writer never managed to attain it for herself. But Austen was no wallflower whom life passed by. We can glean from her letters and archival material that the ideal of love was important to her on a personal level. But she was far more interested in being attracted and compatible as opposed to just being attractive and available.

In December 1802, Jane was engaged for all of one evening to a chap called Harris Bigg-Wither, and then called it off the next morning. Perhaps she realised that marriage would constrain her opportunities to write. And if this was anything less than a profound love that resonated in her soul, then why would she risk having to give up the thing that mattered to her most? Writing nourished, challenged and satisfied her and was her way of making sense of the world. A truth we might consider is that Austen's real love was writing. And that is her happy ending.

Credit: Cassandra Austen

Jane Austen was a satirist – why isn't she treated like one?

By Adam J Smith, Associate Professor in 18th-Century Literature, York St John University

Credit: Wikimedia

From the pompous vanity of Sir Walter Elliot in Persuasion (1817), to the shallow reading habits of Isabella in Northanger Abbey (1817), few characters in the works of Jane Austen are spared the gentle satire of her famously ironic narrative voice. Similarly, some of her best remembered characters, like Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice (1813), are more than willing to share a sarcastic retort or wry observation.

And yet, Austen, like many other women writers of the period such as Frances Burney, Eliza Haywood and Mary Robinson, are almost always missing from histories of satire. This is less to do with whether their works were satirical – because they blatantly were – and more to do with our problematic understanding of satire.

Satire, as writer Dustin Griffin states, is typically defined as a work designed to "attack vice or folly", using "wit or riducule" and engaging "in exaggeration and some sort or fiction."

Austen, like so many women, used satire and humour to critique her situation in a patriarchal society and, in so doing, persistently challenged deeply ingrained assumptions about women's status as the passive, subordinate property of men.

As literary critic Rachel Brownstein memorably put it, women at the time experienced a constant doubleness that frequently became "the ironic self-awareness of a rational creature absurdly caught in a lady's place".

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And yet, when asked to name 18th-century satirists, it is so often the case that we are confronted with the same list of authors: Jonathan Swift, author of Gulliver's Travels (1726), Alexander Pope, author of The Dunciad (1728), and sometimes Henry Fielding, author of Tom Jones (1749). Typically the thread isn't then picked up again until a century later, when we are offered Charles Dickens (in works such as The Pickwick Papers (1837), William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1848) and Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1875).

However, there are so many examples of brilliant satire written by women at the time.

Take for instance, The Art of Ingeniously Tormenting (1753) by Jane Collier. A satirical conduct book which, rather than advising young women on how to become delicate, feminine creatures, instead gave them tips on how to torment their husbands. Why kill your spouse, it cheerfully asks, when it will be far more satisfying to "waste them by degrees", effectively killing them slowly across a lifetime of nagging.

There was also Eliza Haywood's satirical periodical The Parrot (1746), which adopted the perspective of a green parrot in a cage, tired of being objectified and written off as a "pretty prattler".

Sarah Scott's Millenium Hall (1782) is about a group of women deciding to abandon patriarchal society altogether and establish a women-only commune. It is full of withering observations.

While Mary Robinson's Walsingham (1797) exposes the many contradictions of 18th-century Britain's sexist society by telling the story of a girl raised as a boy by parents anxious to have a male heir.

As a girl, Austen loved Frances Burney's Evelina (1778), a novel about a young woman who, upon arriving in Bath for the first time, cannot stop laughing at the utter absurdity of fashionable society. (Evelina is also a novel in which a monkey wearing a suit appears out of nowhere, goes berserk, and is never mentioned again. You should read it immediately.)

Similarly, the anonymous novel The Woman of Colour (1808), sees a young heroine born in Jamaica, Olivia Fairfield, travelling to England to secure her inheritance only to discover the high society she'd been raised to admire is in fact barbarous and stupid. As both spectacle and spectator, Olivia becomes a powerful engine for satire.

Even Charlotte Brontë deployed satire. Brontë was an admirer of William Makepeace Thackeray and dedicated the second edition of Jane Eyre (1847) to his famously satirical novel Vanity Fair (1848). As 19th-century literature expert Jo Waugh has recently observed, Brontë also used her persona, Currer Bell, to enact satire across her career, even articulating her own theory of satire.

The subtle barb instead of the violent attack

That these women's names don't come up in lists of great satirists of the period is partly due to the availability of their writing. Many of the texts I've mentioned have only been recovered and made publicly available again over the last 50 years. But it is also to do with how we talk about satire.

The purest definition of satire is that it performs a critique of something that the author finds to be ridiculous, stupid or dangerous, and uses some kind of distortion as part of this critique. This usually takes the form of exaggeration, but can also be inversion or allegory.

However, you'll notice that when people talk about satire they often describe the lash of the satirist's whip, or the slash of the surgeon's scalpel. Satire is talked about as biting, skewering and violent.

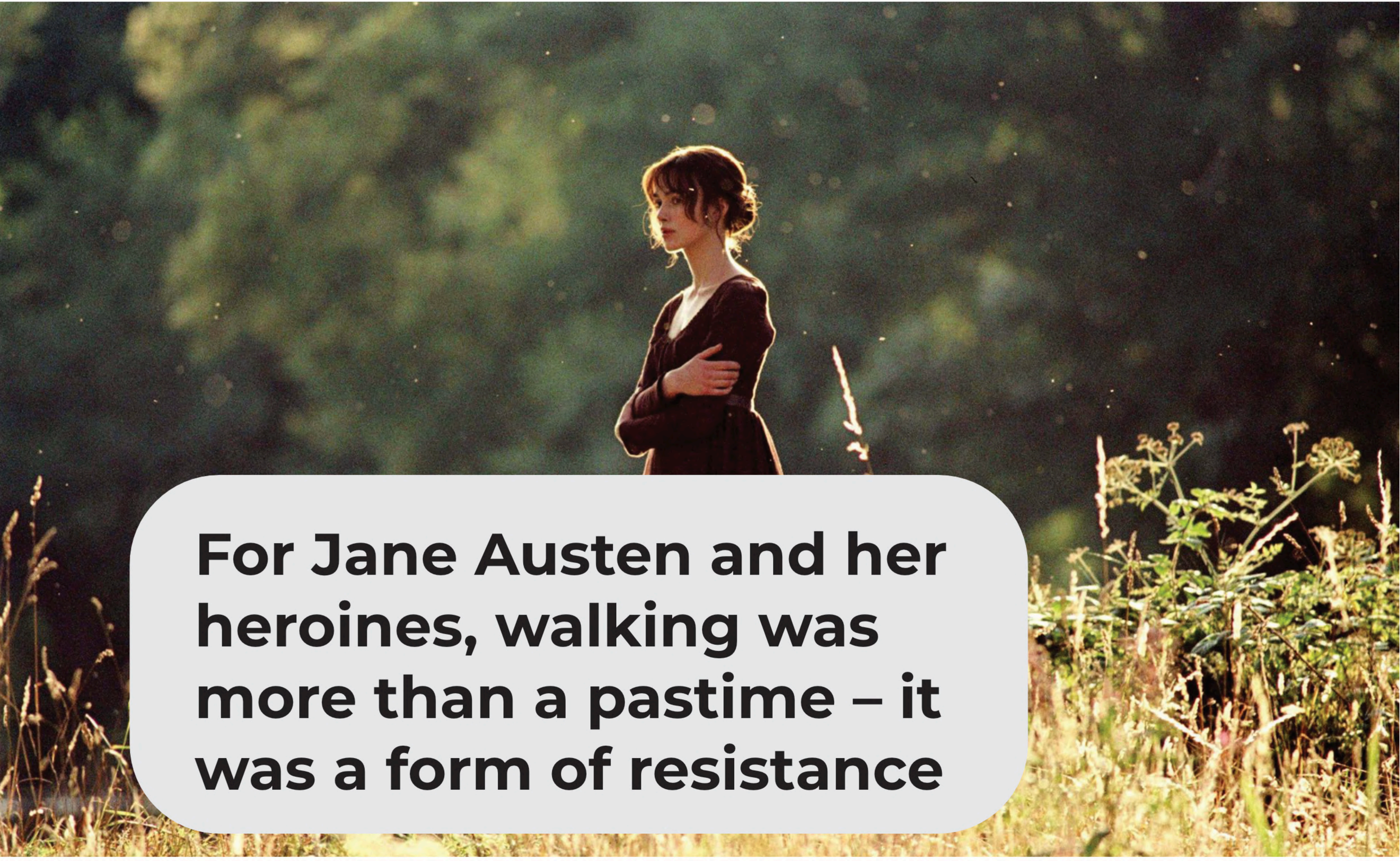
The satirist, from the Roman poet Juvenal through to John Dryden and Jonathan Swift, is often imagined as a heroic aggressor, whose righteous indignation drives him to lash out at a fallen world. This is an image born of Renaissance theories of satire, and one slightly modified (but heavily promoted) during the endless, rarely objective, debates about what satire should be that dominated the 18th century.

As a result, we end up with a definition of satire that is coded in masculine language. So many definitions, even today, talk about satire "attacking", rather than "critiquing".

But in Austen, and the work of her female contemporaries, we see another kind of satire. The joy of so many of the quips and rejoinders issued by characters like Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet is that often their targets don't even realise they have been satirised, so subtle is the critique.

Virginia Woolf said it best when called upon to describe Austen's juvenilia, in particular her early novel Love and Freindship [sic] (1790):

"What is this note, which never merges in the rest, which sounds distinctly and penetratingly all through the volume? It is the sound of laughter. The girl of 15 is laughing, in her corner, at the world."



For Jane Austen and her heroines, walking was more than a pastime – it was a form of resistance

By Nada Saadaoui, PhD Candidate in English Literature, University of Cumbria

Credit: Cinematic/Alamy

In Pride and Prejudice (1813), when heroine Elizabeth Bennet arrives at Netherfield Park with “her petticoat six inches deep in mud”, she walks not only through the fields of Hertfordshire, but into one of literature’s most memorable images.

Her decision to walk alone, “above her ankles in dirt”, is met with horror. “What could she mean by it?” sneers Miss Bingley. “It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence.” And yet, in that walk – unaccompanied, unfashionable, unbothered – Elizabeth reveals more about her spirit and autonomy than any parlour conversation could.

For Austen’s heroines, independence – however “abominable” – often begins on foot. Elizabeth may be the most iconic of Austen’s pedestrians, but she is far from alone. Across Austen’s novels, women are constantly in motion: walking through country lanes, walled gardens, shrubberies, city streets and seaside resorts.

These are not idle excursions. They are socially legible acts, shaped by class, decorum, and gender – yet often quietly resistant to them.

Fanny Price, the often underestimated heroine of Mansfield Park (1814), is typically seen as timid and passive. Yet beneath her reserved exterior lies a quiet but determined spirit.

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“She takes her own independent walk whenever she can”, remarks Mrs Norris disapprovingly. “She certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence, and nonsense about her.” Austen’s choice of “nonsense” here is revealing: Fanny’s desire for solitude and self-direction is not revolutionary, but it is gently subversive. In a world offering women little room for self-assertion, her steps become acts of resistance.

When Jane Fairfax, constrained by class and circumstance in Emma (1815), declines a carriage ride, she asserts: “I would rather walk … quick walking will refresh me.” It’s a seemingly modest decision, but one layered with significance. To walk is to control your own movement, to maintain autonomy and resist the genteel suffocation of being constantly observed or helped.

In Persuasion (1817), Anne Elliot’s story shows walking as a path to renewal. Reserved and long burdened by regret, Anne finds restoration in the coastal air of Lyme Regis. As she walks along the Cobb, Austen notes that “she was looking remarkably well … having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind … and by the animation of eye which it had also produced”.

Her emotional reawakening is framed as a physical one. Walking becomes not only therapeutic but transformative – a way back to herself.

Not all of Austen’s walks are reflective or restorative. Some are decidedly social. Lydia and Kitty Bennet’s frequent walks to Meryton in Pride and Prejudice, for example, are driven as much by shopping as by the hope of romantic encounters.

Austen notes the “most convenient distance” of the village, where “their eyes were immediately wandering up in the street in quest of the officers”.

These girls were more interested in uniforms than in bonnets.

Yet even this behaviour hints at something subtler. For young, unmarried women, shopping and social errands were among the few socially sanctioned reasons to move independently through public space. These excursions offered moments of visibility, mobility, and the possibility of courtship – however frivolously pursued.

Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey (1817), a devoted reader of gothic fiction, fuses her walks with imagination. As she strolls along the Avon River with the Tilneys, she muses: “It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through in The Mysteries of Udolpho.” Walking becomes an act of imaginative projection, where the boundaries between fiction and reality blur in the mind of a heroine learning to navigate both the world and herself.

Jane Austen the walker

Austen’s fiction draws much of its vitality from her own experiences. She was, by her own admission, a “desperate walker”, rarely deterred by weather, terrain or propriety.

Her letters, written from Bath, Steventon, Chawton and elsewhere, capture the physicality and pleasure of walking in vivid, often playful detail. These glimpses into her daily life reveal not only her attachment to movement but also the quiet autonomy it afforded her.

In 1805, Austen writes from Bath: “Yesterday was a busy day with me, or at least with my feet & my stockings; I was walking almost all day long.”

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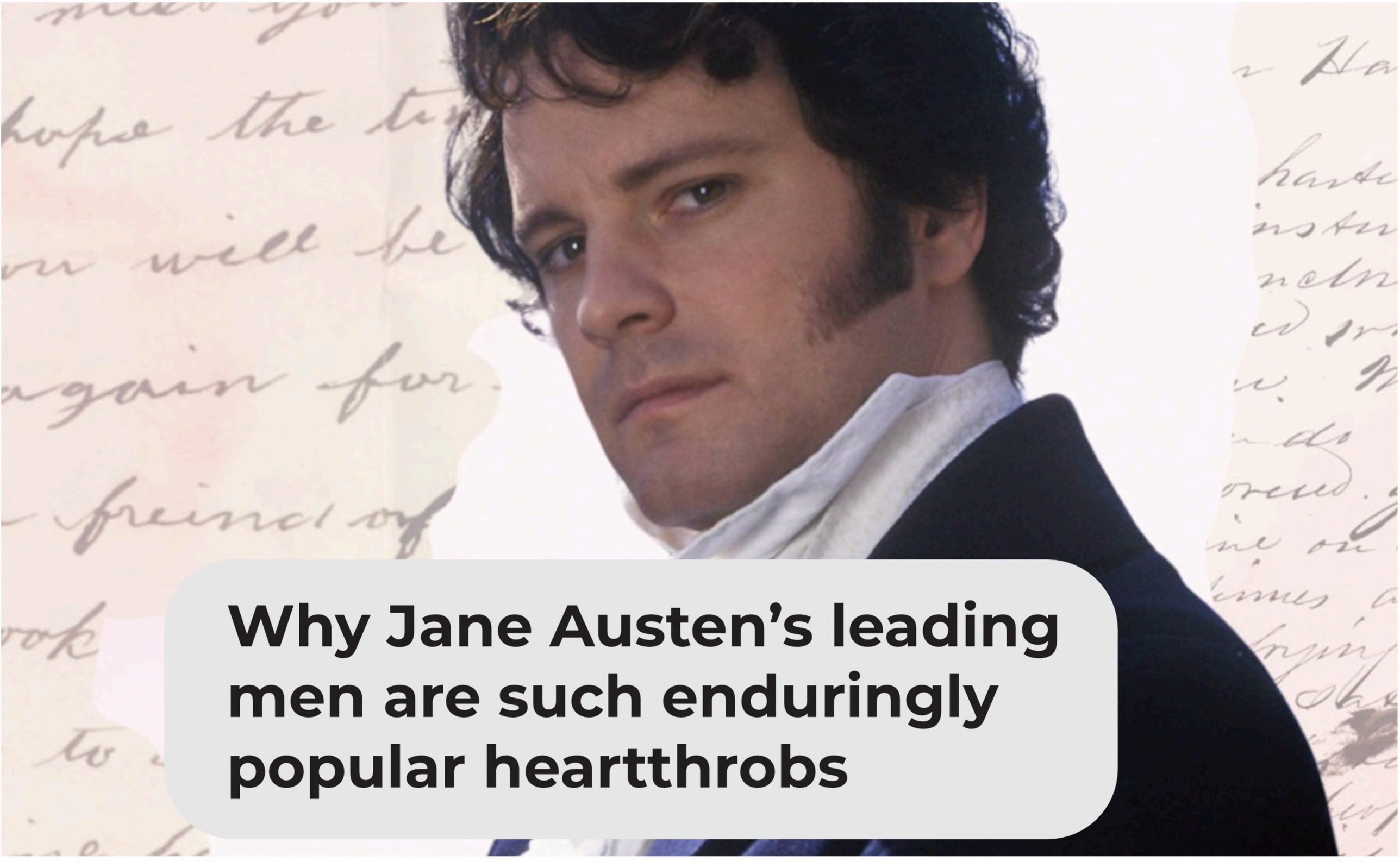
Several years later, in 1813, she reports with unmistakable relief: “I walked to Alton, & dirt excepted, found it delightful … before I set out we were visited by several callers, all of whom my mother was glad to see, & I very glad to escape.”

Perhaps most revealing is an earlier letter from December 1798, in which Austen describes a rare solitary excursion: “I enjoyed the hard black frosts of last week very much, & one day while they lasted walked to Deane by myself. I do not know that I ever did such a thing in my life before.” The comment registers the novelty and boldness of a woman walking alone.

In an age where walking is once again praised for its physical and mental benefits, Austen’s fiction reminds us that these virtues are not new. Her characters have been walking for centuries – through mud, across class boundaries and against expectation.

They walk in pursuit of clarity, connection, escape and self-hood. Their steps – measured or impulsive, solitary or social – mark turning points in their lives. And in a world designed to keep them stationary, their walking remains a radical act.

Credit: H.M Brock / Wikipedia



Why Jane Austen's leading men are such enduringly popular heartthrobs

By Louise Curran, Lecturer 18th-Century and Romantic Literature, University of Birmingham

Credit: Alamy

In Ang Lee's adaptation of Sense and Sensibility (1995), the handsome cad Willoughby (played by Greg Wise) rescues Marianne (Kate Winslet) on horseback in the middle of a raging storm. Pathetic fallacy has rarely looked so good.

Marianne locks eyes with him and falls passionately in love. In Austen's version, though, it is Marianne's mother and sister who first register his attractions. "The eyes of both were fixed on him with an evident wonder and a secret admiration … his person, which was uncommonly handsome, received additional charms from his voice and expression."

Willoughby has "exterior attractions" that the two women quickly notice.

Once Marianne can master her own confusion, she rapidly constructs him in her mind as the ideal romantic protagonist.

"His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story … Her imagination was busy, her reflections were pleasant, and the pain of a sprained ankle was disregarded."

Yet despite such auspicious beginnings, by the end of the novel Willoughby has proved to be feckless, shallow and passively cruel. The actual leading man turns out to be the respectable, yet taciturn, Colonel Brandon (played in the film by Alan Rickman).

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In his introduction to the 1895 edition of Sense and Sensibility, the poet and essayist Henry Austin Dobson remarked upon the shrewd realism at work in Austen's ending: "Every one does not get a Bingley, or a Darcy (with a park); but a good many sensible girls like Elinor pair off contentedly with poor creatures like Edward Ferrars, while not a few enthusiasts like Marianne decline at last upon middle-aged colonels with flannel waistcoats."

For many modern readers, Brandon remains a disappointing compromise when compared with Willoughby's flagrant virility.

Austen's heartthrobs

All of Austen's leading men are rich, which certainly helps to intensify their charms. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pride and Prejudice is the wealthiest man of Austen's fiction.

Initially he draws local attention for his "fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report, which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year", until he is quickly "discovered to be proud".

One of the key debates of Pride and Prejudice (1813) concerns marriage for love versus convenience and financial security. Elizabeth Bennet's intelligent aunt Mrs Gardiner argues that the phrase "violently in love" is "so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite" and "often applied to feelings which arise only from a half hour's acquaintance".

She eloquently expresses the problematic nature of infatuation and the fictional construction of the heroic ideal so prevalent in Regency culture.

The phrase recurs right at the end of the novel, at the moment Elizabeth discloses her feelings for Darcy, producing a happiness in him that he "had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do".

The repeated phrase is a lovely touch, hesitating as it does between endorsing Darcy as a swoon-worthy leading man, burning with passion, and holding back from such excesses through the suggestion of a faint ridiculousness.

The 1995 BBC adaptation of Pride and Prejudice gave visual language to this conjunction of intrepid yet hesitant masculinity. Darcy (played memorably by Colin Firth) emerged from water like an Adonis in a wet shirt, only to face an embarrassed encounter with Elizabeth (Jennifer Ehle). Though usually handsome and always relatively rich, Austen's leading men are also unconventional in that they can be awkward, mistaken, tongue-tied – even a bit dull.

When Darcy's housekeeper at Pemberley describes him as "handsome", this adjective, as Austen expert Janet Todd has noted, "extends over physical, social and moral qualities". This conjunction of qualities shapes the leading men of Austen's fiction not so much as suitors as familiar figures who come to be transformed by love.

Uncomfortable matches

Some aspects of this heroism might strike modern readers as odd, and they alert us to changing perceptions of the romantic hero since Austen's time.

The age difference in Emma between Emma Woodhouse (21) and George Knightley (37) was not uncommon in the Regency era, when marriage was often predicated on women's reproductive value and men's financial security.

It can be uncomfortable for some readers when Knightley emphasises the fact that he was 16 years old when Emma was born (as he is cradling his baby niece). And when he jokes about having been in love with her since she was "13 at least". Rather than suggesting anything dubious, this was intended to draw attention to the incremental steps the couple make from brother and sister-in-law to friends and then lovers.

Recent adaptations of Emma seem uncomfortable with this age gap. Despite the fact that both Jeremy Northam and Johnny Flynn were in their mid-30s, and of similar age to Knightley in their respective versions (1996 and 2020), Flynn gives off a younger, more virile energy. He punches the air in joy when he realises Emma will marry him, in contrast to Northam's emotional restraint.

Maria Edgeworth, a contemporary novelist and important influence on Austen, was struck by the way Austen's leading men were supportive in private as much as in public.

In a letter, Edgeworth referenced the moment in Persuasion (1817) where Captain Wentworth shows his feelings for Anne by submitting to domestic chores: "The love and lover [are] admirably well drawn: don't you see Captain Wentworth, or rather don't you in her place feel him taking the boisterous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa?"

In figures such as Emma's Mr Knightley, who represents the landed English class, and Persuasion's Frederick Wentworth, a naval hero of the Napoleonic wars, Austen put emphasis on a new kind of domestic masculinity as a source of female desire and national pride.

Like Austen's heroines, her leading men are not superlatively good. Their enduring appeal lies more in their capacity for self development and their acceptance of change and adaptation. Austen depicts love as the awakening of mutual esteem. It's something to be worked on rather than something that magically arrives.

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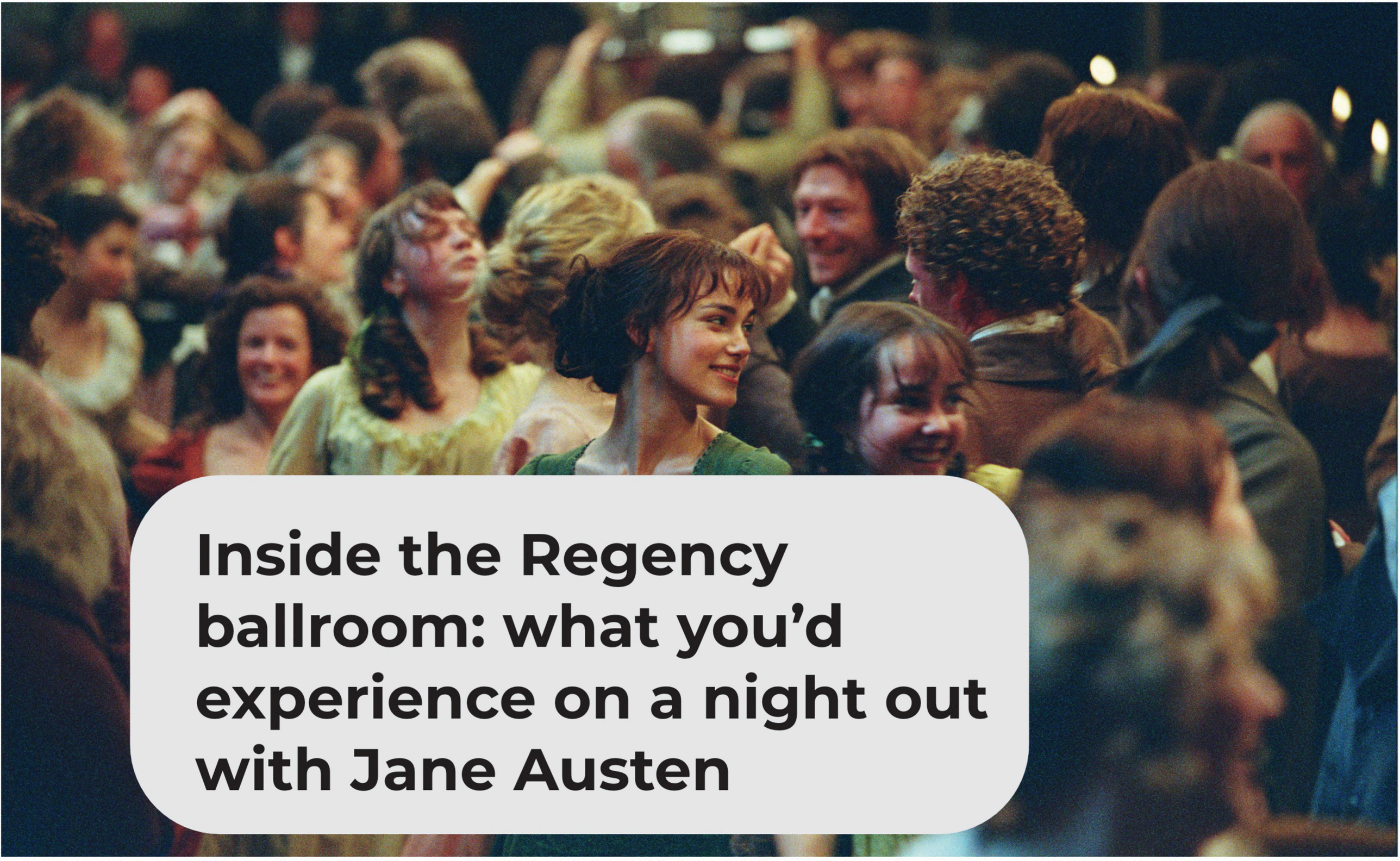

Inside the Regency ballroom: what you'd experience on a night out with Jane Austen

By Hillary Burlock, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History, University of Liverpool

Credit: Alamy

The ballrooms of Jane Austen's Britain have been hailed in literature and period dramas as a marriage market where young men and women could meet and mingle. The ballroom set the scene for Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy's first encounter at Meryton's assembly rooms in Pride and Prejudice (1813), and where Catherine Moreland and Henry Tilney bantered in Bath in Northanger Abbey (1817).

Austen herself frequented balls in Basingstoke and Southampton. The ballroom was the place to see and be seen, the focal point for socialising during "the season". The season took place during the winter months and involved a concentrated period of public entertainments like balls, concerts and card assemblies (in which guests met to play card games).

Ball-goers needed months to prepare for these events. This included ordering gloves and shoes, and buying new gowns or dressing up old ones. Austen deliberately kept her china crepe dress from being seen before the next ball, observing that the ballroom "was a place where you would be judged".

Ladies and gentlemen also needed to polish their dance steps. From an early age, they were instructed in how to dance, bow and curtsy, walk and greet people of differing ranks.

Mastering these basics of deportment was essential, as they would be scrutinised in the ballroom.

While in Bath in 1740, Elizabeth Robinson (future leader of the 18th-century English women's intellectual circle the Bluestockings) observed that the education of another woman was lacking, writing: "[as] for her Curtsey

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In Northanger Abbey, Catherine Moreland's first ball at the Upper Rooms in Bath is filled with anxiety, as: "The season was full, the room crowded, and the two ladies squeezed in as well as they could. As for Mr Allen, he repaired directly to the card-room, and left them to enjoy a mob by themselves."

To quell the "mob", the ballroom was managed by a master of ceremonies, who had the role of facilitating introductions, enforcing the rules and mediating disputes.

Balls opened with the minuet (a French social dance) performed by one couple at a time. A well-danced minuet was a source of pride for genteel society, as some revelled in exhibiting their accomplishments. But it was also a source of anxiety.

When a young woman named Eliza Smith married the Austens' wealthy neighbour William Chute in 1793, she was so nervous about dancing that her mother wrote: "I am glad for your Sake there are no Minuets at Basingstoke, I know the terror you have in dancing not that you have any occasion for such fears."

Assessing dance skill was central to the experience of the ballroom, making it even more important for dancers to try to put their best foot forward. Sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Canning (cousin of the prime minister George Canning) wrote to her mother from Bath in December 1792 that: "I was very much entertained with the bad minuet-dancers, especially with a Mr Badcock who was obliged to stand up with seven, or eight Ladies successively, to the great diversion of the Spectators."

After the minuets, country dances filled the evening, with a column of men standing opposite their female partners. Relieved the minuets were over, Miss Canning wrote: "At last the Country dances began, there was great humming, & hawing whether or no I should dance … & I declared … that I should like to dance if I could get some mighty smart partner."

Young ladies recorded triumphant lists of dance partners, and, indeed, Austen recalled dancing with Stephen Terry, T. Chute, James Digweed and Catherine Bigg one evening, observing: "There was a scarcity of men in general, and a still greater scarcity of any that were good for much … There was commonly a couple of ladies standing up together, but not often any so amiable as ourselves."

For the most part, men were expected to ask women to dance with them. According to dance manuals by Thomas Wilson and G.M.S. Chivers, the ballroom occasionally saw two women or two men dancing together.

While it is assumed that it was the lady's prerogative to accept or decline invitations to dance, she could not afford to refuse an offer unless she had no intention to dance at all "and consequently may be considered no lady".

In Pride and Prejudice, though Elizabeth Bennet would prefer not to dance with Mr Collins at the Netherfield Ball, refusing him would mean losing the opportunity to dance altogether.

However, Austen herself found a way of skirting around these rules at the Kempshott ball. Writing to her sister Cassandra in 1798 she explained that: "One of my gayest actions was sitting down two dances in preference to having Lord Bolton's eldest son for my partner, who danced too ill to be endured." Austen was an excellent dancer herself, proudly proclaiming that she could dance 20 dances in an evening "without any fatigue".

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Balls at the assembly rooms lasted for about five hours until precisely 11 or 12am, when, upon a signal from the master of ceremonies, the dancing concluded, even in the middle of a dance. Grudgingly, the dancers changed their dance pumps for sturdier shoes and donned their cloaks, with sedan chairs and carriages ready to whisk them home to their lodgings by the light of the moon.

Credit: T. Wilson / Wikipedia

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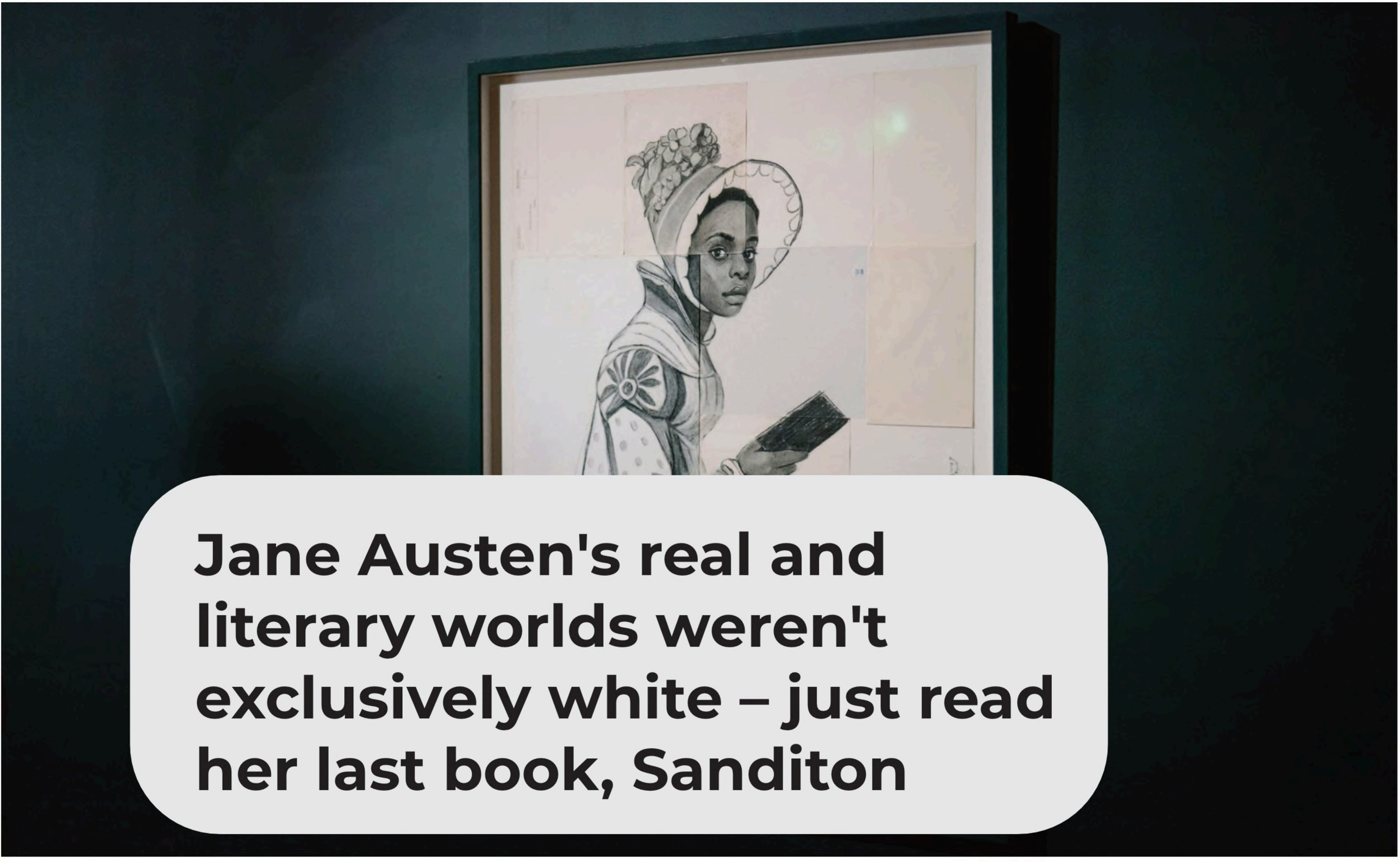

Jane Austen's real and literary worlds weren't exclusively white – just read her last book, Sanditon

By Olivia Robotham Carpenter, Lecturer in Literature, University of York

Credit: Harewood House Trust

Jane Austen penned the last sentences of her unfinished manuscript for the novel we know as Sanditon in March 1817 before she died that July. Like me, many Austen fans often stumble upon this work after they have read all six of her completed novels.

At this point, readers of Austen feel like they know her and have sought out Sanditon because they want more of what they loved in her other works. However, they are often surprised by what they find.

In the final months of her life, Austen had moved away from writing about the English country house. The titular Sanditon is instead a seaside health resort, and the novel follows characters who spend a season there trying to get healthy or wealthy.

Austen's most striking departure from the rest of her work, however, is in her inclusion of the character of Miss Lambe – a young heiress staying at the resort who is of African descent. Sanditon is the only Austen novel to contain an explicitly Black character.

Sanditon's narrator explains that Miss Lambe is a mixed-race Black heiress of just 17 years old. Austen calls her a "chilly and tender" girl who attracts attention because she requires luxuries such as "a maid of her own", and "the best room in the lodgings".

Far from being disadvantaged because of race, Miss Lambe has more privileges than many of her white peers, and they react with interest and envy. The resort's scheming foundress, Lady Denham, even fantasises about making an advantageous match for her nephew with the girl.

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Miss Lambe's presence in Austen's novel presents a stark challenge to any assumptions that Austen never wrote about people of colour. Many still assume that authors in Austen's time simply weren't writing about Black characters.

However, Miss Lambe is not the only character of this background to appear in books of the period. I am currently finishing up a book on the subject of Black representation in British marriage plots. I research Black characters who are heiresses, escapees, keepers of dark secrets, and participants in all manner of surprise twists and turns.

For example, in the anonymously authored 1808 novel The Woman of Colour, trouble ensues when a young Black woman, Olivia Fairfield, travels to England from Jamaica in order to marry according to her father's wishes.

There have also been several rich and wonderful research projects demonstrating the enormous variety of Black British history in Jane Austen's England. The writer and academic Gretchen Gerzina's book Black England, for example, brings to life a vision of this world that included Black community, activism and intellectualism.

The Mapping Black London project, a stunningly detailed digital resource from Northeastern University, London, provides interactive maps demonstrating evidence of Black life in the city through the records of everyday people. We can see the proof of Black Britons being baptised, getting married, or being buried in London during Austen's lifetime.

We can also turn to Black writers from the period who tell us their story directly, such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and Mary Prince. Black British writers like these commented directly on their experience of finding ways to survive the violence of transatlantic chattel slavery.

In contrast to these writers' real experiences, however, Miss Lambe's in Austen's literary take on Regency England is markedly different. As an heiress, she has a lot more in common with real historical figures who were the children of white British enslavers and Afro-Caribbean women.

The scholar of early American and Atlantic history, Daniel Livesay, has written extensively on these figures in his book Children of Uncertain Fortune, detailing the lives of the privileged few who were acknowledged by white fathers, and were either born free or granted their freedom. Such children were often educated on both sides of the Atlantic and might apply for special legal status, giving them similar rights to those of white British subjects.

Austen hints at this background for Miss Lambe in discussions of her wealth. Like the children Livesay discusses, Miss Lambe has left the West Indies and is now growing up in England. She is in the care of Mrs Griffiths, an older lady who treats her as "beyond comparison the most important and precious" client. This is because Miss Lambe "paid in proportion to her fortune".

A wealthy family member would have needed to set up this arrangement with Mrs Griffiths. The family member also would have helped Miss Lambe gain the special legal status necessary for a Black person to inherit a fortune under colonial law.

While we can celebrate Austen's inclusion of a Black character, we know that representation alone is not empowerment.

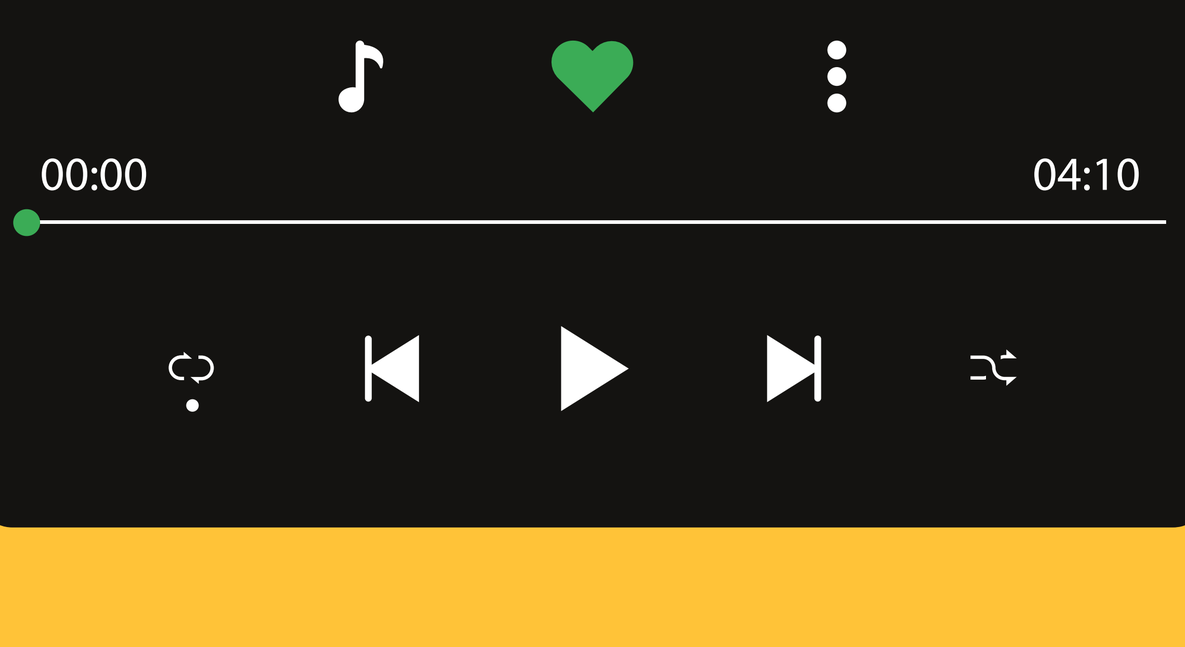
Crystal Clarke as Georgiana Lambe, with Rose Williams as Charlotte Heywood and Rosie Graham as Alison Heywood in the TV adaptation of Sanditon. Credit: ITV

As Kerry Sinanan, an academic in pre-1800 literature and culture, has insisted, we need to be careful about an uncritical celebration of Austen's "radical politics".

When we think of Black life in Austen's world we need to think both about the Black wealth and privilege Austen chooses to represent in Miss Lambe as well as the enslavement Austen never addresses. If we long for Austen to be a champion of all women, including Black women, we may be sorely disappointed by Austen's ten brief sentences mentioning her sole Black character.

Nevertheless, Miss Lambe remains an important reminder as we celebrate Austen's enduring legacy 250 years on: Black British life and experience have always been part of British literature and history. Remembering this character in Austen's writing can only help to add urgency to the ongoing re-evaluation of how we teach, learn and understand that literature and history.

Click on the icon below to listen to the full podcast series of Jane Austen's Paper Trail



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Jane Austen: why are adaptations of Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey so rare?

By Amy Wilcockson, Research Fellow, English Literature, Queen Mary University of London

Credit: Alamy

More than two centuries after her death, Jane Austen is one of the most adapted authors of all time, her life and novels dramatised for film and television from every angle imaginable. Despite the plethora of Pride and Prejudice adaptations, Netflix is making its own version, starring Emma Corrin, Jack Lowden and Olivia Colman.

Sense and Sensibility is being rehashed too, with Daisy Edgar-Jones as Elinor Dashwood. On the small screen, the BBC released the hit documentary Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius alongside an adaptation of Gill Hornby's novel Miss Austen that centres on Austen's sister Cassandra (plus a forthcoming sequel).

A dramatisation of Janice Hadlow's novel The Other Bennet Sister

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2005 Pride and Prejudice film starring Keira Knightley as Lizzy, plus the enduring appeal of that wet-shirted Mr Darcy moment from the BBC series in 1995, it is clear this novel is Austen's most enduring work. But do we need another adaptation? Or another "alternative" view of Austen or Lizzy Bennet's lives?

I'm the first to admit that I'm an Austen fan. Her stories have timeless appeal. They focus on romance and class, alongside larger issues of the Regency period such as power, the role of women and even slavery - although the representation of slavery and empire in Austen's work is long contested.

So what of the "forgotten", less-adapted novels: Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park? These are the two of Austen's novels that bring wider issues into focus. Why are film-makers happy to leave these stories be? Are their narratives less compelling or have we been brainwashed by Mr Darcy and his breeches?

Northanger Abbey was last adapted in 2007 for ITV, starring Felicity Jones as the heroine Catherine Morland. Its previous iteration premiered in 1987 with Katharine Schlesinger in the lead role. There has never been a film version.

Written in 1798-99, Northanger Abbey was not published until six months after Austen's death in December 1817. It is a gothic pastiche, satirising the melodramatic plots and moody locations of popular novels at the time. It also offers a harsh criticism of the conventions of marriage, wealth and social status faced by young women.

Influenced by her sensational gothic reading material, Catherine Morland initially believes General Tilney, with whom she is staying, is guilty of killing his wife. While not a murderer, General Tilney does treat Catherine callously.

After learning that she is not a wealthy heiress, he declares her unsuitable to marry his son, Henry, turfs her out of Northanger Abbey, and leaves her facing a long journey home alone - a fate perilous to any proper young lady. Snobbishness and gender conventions combine as Austen ridicules class and social ambition.

Published in 1814, Mansfield Park was Austen's third novel. Long considered to be the odd one out of Austen's works, it was adapted as a TV series in 1983, with film versions released in 1999 and 2007.

In Mansfield Park, Austen examines bigger issues, including infidelity, gambling and most problematically of all, the fact that Sir Thomas Bertram (the uncle of the heroine Fanny Price) owns a plantation in Antigua.

Bringing up the slavery question

Fanny asks her uncle about the slave trade, but is ignored. By positioning a key character as a plantation owner, many scholars - myself included - argue that Austen was trying to draw attention to this debate in her novel. There is also plenty of circumstantial evidence

that Mansfield Park is named for Lord Mansfield, a judge who played an important role in ending slavery in England.

Recent research examining Austen's family demonstrates that three of her brothers were engaged in anti-slavery activism, her letters share that she was "much in love" with the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, and some critics posit the view that Austen herself supported abolition. Mansfield Park and Emma both feature discussions on the slave trade.

At the very least, Austen was interested in questions of slavery and race. While it is impossible to definitively decipher her personal views from her literary works, it is clear that important issues such as slavery feature in her novels, albeit subtly.

Perhaps it is this serious and timely subject matter, so unlike the usual Austen narrative, that puts off film-makers. But Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park deserve their time in the limelight.

Rather than iterations of Austen's afterlives or Lizzy's family members, powerful and original adaptations of these two novels would invigorate new generations of readers and filmgoers. Who wouldn't want to watch Greta Gerwig's Northanger Abbey? It is a serious travesty that a film version has never been released.

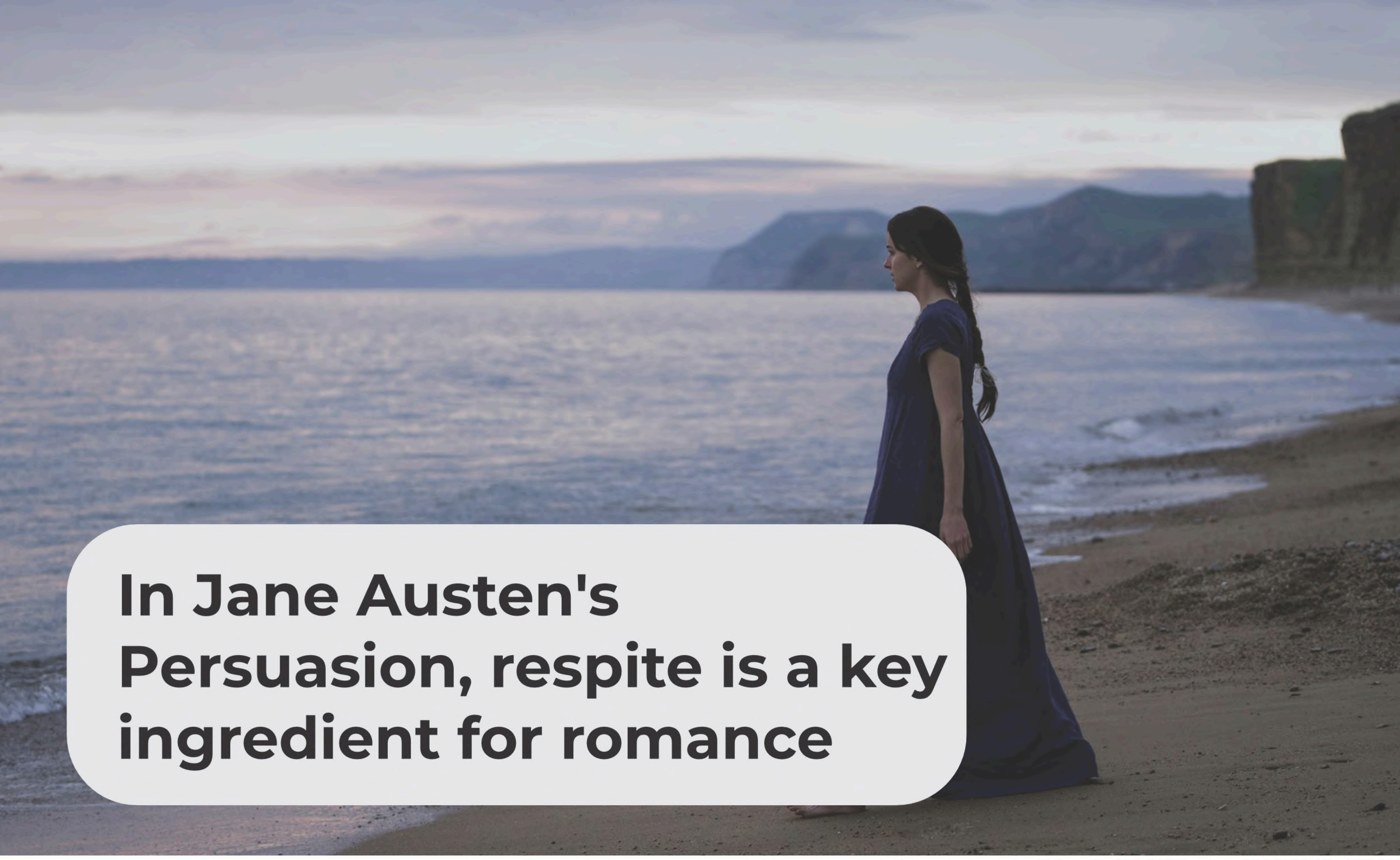
Perhaps big studios simply haven't got around to commissioning a new Northanger Abbey or Mansfield Park. But in doing so, they are neglecting a third of Austen's published novels.

They represent Austen's most nuanced works, focusing not just on romance (although both heroines get their happy endings) but on society's wider issues. Crucially, they demonstrate that their author was not just a writer of fluffy romance, but an informed observer of politics and society and the structures that underpinned them.

Even more radically, film-makers could offer a different perspective by adapting one of her contemporaries' novels - Austen was not the only female author writing during this period.

Scottish novelist Susan Ferrier admired Austen's work, yet was a hugely successful author in her own right, outselling Austen in the 1800s. Any of her three novels - Marriage; The Inheritance; and Destiny, would be sure-fire Regency hits. Or Gothic pioneer Ann Radcliffe whose tale The Mysteries of Udolpho, one of the Gothic novels Catherine Morland so enjoys, is ripe for the big screen.

Audiences would perhaps see film versions of her fellow authors' works as a way to honour Austen's legacy too, offering viewers something familiar yet different.



In Jane Austen's Persuasion, respite is a key ingredient for romance

By Barbara Cooke, Programme Leader and Senior Lecturer in English, Loughborough University

Credit: Nick Wall/Netflix

When it comes to holiday romances, some might harbour visions of a beautiful stranger alone in a beach or bar, someone who takes a keen interest in them, gives them the best two weeks of their lives then disappears into the sunset. Something magical and fleeting, but removed from everyday life.

One writer, however, proved in novel after novel that a change of scene can also inspire a lasting change of mind. It might shake the blinkered out of an unhelpful way of seeing the world, or reveal hidden depths in overlooked friends and acquaintances. It can take people away from those who do not appreciate them, and introduce them into new communities in which they thrive.

Jane Austen's heroines are a nomadic bunch, by and large. The author is known for psychological development, but the emotional and educational progress of her romantic plot lines is almost always kick-started by a series of more literal journeys. Movements between home, "seasons" in the city and prolonged visits to family and friends map out narrative progress towards love.

Following the footsteps of one Austen protagonist, Anne Elliot of Persuasion (1817), reveals how the different narrative locations she inhabits present different opportunities for her to grow in confidence and reclaim a love that she thought lost forever. At the same time, they also enable Frederick Wentworth, her erstwhile fiancé, to reconsider his false

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assumptions about her and see her in a more truthful (not to mention more flattering) light.

It's something I explore in my soon-to-be-published book, Love and Landscape: Iconic Meeting Places in Classic and Contemporary Literature.

When we meet Anne at the beginning of Persuasion, she clearly needs to get out more. She is 26 and unmarried, having been convinced at 19 by her snobbish family to end her engagement to Wentworth.

Now, she is unloved and overlooked by her father and elder sister Elizabeth and, when her family's profligate spending means they must rent out their home and seek cheaper accommodation, it is a blessing in disguise for Anne.

She goes first to visit her other, married sister in the Somerset village of Uppercross. Mary is as self-centred as Elizabeth and their father, but does at least love and appreciate Anne. Mary's sisters-in-law, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, live nearby with their parents and are fond of her too. Crucially, this kinder branch of Anne's family is also connected to the now-Captain Wentworth, who has made a good career for himself in the Napoleonic wars and is warmly welcomed into their circle.

Anne's first move having brought her into better company, she then makes a second journey, with this group, to the coastal town of Lyme Regis. Here, the fresh sea air restores her faded youth, and Wentworth is gratifyingly present when a passing stranger looks at her "with a degree of earnest admiration".

Anne however is more than a pretty face, and her stay at Lyme also allows her to show off her pragmatism and good judgement when Louisa is knocked unconscious by a bad fall. Wentworth, who blames himself for the accident, benefits directly from Anne's taking charge of the situation.

Their last move, to Bath, shows the nascent couple carving out small opportunities for intimacy among crowded ballrooms and claustrophobic family gatherings.

When they are finally able confirm their mutual affection, they engineer a retreat to a gravel walk which is only "comparatively quiet and retired", and count on their fellow walkers being too wrapped up in their own business to pay them much attention.

In Northanger Abbey (1817), Austen's most satirical novel, it is observed that "if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad". In Persuasion, Anne's particular adventures bring her into a more supportive community, reinvigorate her youth and give her the chance to prove her worth.

In Austen's footsteps

Over the past two centuries, a huge variety of writers have forged their own romantic plot lines from paths first cut by Anne Elliot, Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey and Elizabeth Bennet of Pride and

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Prejudice (1813). For those whose stories feature marginalised characters, for example, the value of a sympathetic and supportive community becomes even more important.

So it is that author Sarah Waters imaginatively reconstructs pockets of Victorian London in Tipping the Velvet (1998) in which queer characters are visible and able to celebrate their love. The South London barbershops and jazz clubs of Open Water (2022) offer a similar respite for Caleb Azumah Nelson's young Black lovers, who crave spaces in which they can be themselves away from the prejudices and false assumptions of mainstream society.

Jane Austen's novels perform a kind of romantic alchemy in which travel is the catalyst. From Lyme to Bath, Hertfordshire to the Peak District, her protagonists move through a holiday atmosphere, but the transformations they undergo along the way are anything but fleeting. There might be a depressing uniformity in marriage as the inevitable, final destination, but we are left in no doubt that these marriages – like Austen's legacy – are built to last.

Credit: C.E. Brock

Is it dangerous to catch a cold … or was Jane Austen just being dramatic?

By Ana Fernandez Mosquera, Researcher in Literary Criticism, University of Vigo

Credit: C. E. Brock/The British Library

I have always been fascinated by how Jane Austen depicts the physicality and health of her characters. All of her novels contain references to physical condition, ailments, or advice on wellbeing – indeed, the word “health” appears more than a hundred times throughout her six best-known works. These are not conventional medical descriptions, but they do display surprising accuracy and narrative consistency.

The prominence of health and illness in Austen's novels begs the question: What if the drama of her writing lay not in romance… but in the common cold?

Austen's interest in illness

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, illness played a major part in everyday life. Without antibiotics or anaesthesia, the smallest ailment could quickly become something more serious.

Medicine was based on theories such as humouralism, and treatments included bloodletting, tonics and purges. Doctors, apothecaries and quack healers existed and coexisted, but a lot of care – especially for women – was provided at home. Infections were common, meaning hospitals were a last resort.

Health recommendations tended to revolve around nature, fresh air, rest and bathing. Jane Austen advised daily exercise, contact with nature and a moderate diet as keys to good health. She enjoyed walks in the open air and was wary of excessive medical treatments. Her

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letters reflect a practical and balanced approach to physical and mental wellbeing.

It is believed that in 1815, when she went to care for her brother, she probably contracted tuberculosis. This degenerated into a kidney infection and eventually into Addison's disease, which was unknown at the time. There is still some debate about the cause of her death. Disease, lymphoma, stomach cancer or even poisoning have all been proposed – though the last of these may venture into the realms of conspiracy theory.

Austen's friendship with her brother's doctor gave her a good basis for discussing ailments accurately: her novels abound with colds, rheumatism and, of course, the dreaded "chill".

But what was the actual risk of walking in the English rain? There is no shortage of online debate about whether the high fever suffered by Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility after going for a walk in the pouring rain was bad luck or pure drama. Both Jane Bennet – in Pride and Prejudice – and Marianne end up ill after getting wet, with the latter left on the verge of death. Health warning, or plain old narrative device?

The dangers of the British climate

In the context of the 19th century, getting caught in the rain was no small thing. Today we know that it does not cause a cold on its own, but at that time it was believed that cooling the body could trigger serious illnesses. This concern was well-founded: without access to antibiotics or effective treatments, a mild respiratory infection could easily develop into bronchitis or potentially fatal pneumonia. For this reason, accounts from the period often treated these situations with a dramatic tone that, far from exaggerating, reflected a real fear of the consequences of simple exposure to cold and damp.

William Buchan – author of Domestic Medicine, a famous medical manual that began circulating in 1769 and was reprinted throughout the 19th century – was unequivocal: the British climate was a public health problem. According to him, there was no other place where the weather changed as much and as quickly as Great Britain. And these variations, he said, were some of the main causes of colds, because they interrupted the body's perspiration.

Buchan particularly emphasised the risk of staying in wet clothes. Not only because of the cold, which was already a problem in itself, but because dampness could "penetrate" the body and aggravate the situation. Even the strongest could fall ill: fevers, rheumatism and serious ailments were commonplace, even among young, healthy people.

Of course, Buchan did not want anyone to stay home for fear of getting wet. But he did recommend acting quickly: changing clothes as soon as possible or, if that was not possible, at least keeping moving until dry. What should never be done – though many people did it anyway

– was to sit out in the countryside or, worse still, sleep in wet clothes. For him, these were sure-fire recipes for illness.

Illness as a literary device

These maladies also reflect many social and gendered factors that affect women. In classical literature, illness is often a way for female characters to attract attention, express vulnerability, or even become more attractive in their fragility. Illnesses and accidents can disrupt their lives and change everything, sometimes forever.

In the 19th century, many women were diagnosed with what were known as “nervous disorders”, a term that encompassed vague symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, insomnia and melancholy. It served above all to reinforce stereotypes of female fragility. Austen portrays different nuances of this ailment: Mrs Bennet's theatrical "poor nerves" in Pride and Prejudice, Marianne Dashwood's overflowing passion, the silent melancholy of Anne Elliot – the protagonist of Persuasion – and the resigned pallor of Jane Fairfax in Emma.

Mary Elliot, in Persuasion, resorts to feigned ailments to attract attention or avoid responsibilities such as caring for children, though her complaints – headaches, fatigue, indisposition – are not very credible to either the characters or the reader. Austen criticises this fictitious illness, which was typical of certain wealthy sectors of society where boredom and egocentricity were disguised as physical discomfort. This critical view also stems from her personal experience caring for her mother, whose health was fragile and variable.

So did Marianne Dashwood nearly die from a simple downpour in Sense and Sensibility, or did Austen bring her to the brink of death to change her fate? In her novels, illnesses and accidents not only generate drama – they also alter the course of the characters' lives.

In Persuasion, Louisa Musgrove's serious injury opens the way for another suitor. Jane Bennet catches a cold after riding in the rain, and her convalescence brings her sister Elizabeth closer to Mr Darcy. In Austen's plots, fever often precedes the big romantic twist.

The body as a metaphor

In Austen's world, the body doesn't just get sick – it talks.

Through fevers, fainting spells and colds, her novels give shape to repressed emotions, class tensions and gender inequalities. Illness serves as a metaphor for what changes, hurts, or simply cannot be said aloud. Austen did not view discomfort from the outside – she knew it, experienced it, and turned it into literature. Her characters suffer, but they also resist.

And they continue to speak to us today, with a lucidity that never fades. As Austen wrote, with her characteristic irony intact, in a letter from 1816: "I continue very tolerably well, much better than any one could have supposed possible". We can surmise that she may have been referring not only to her bodily health.

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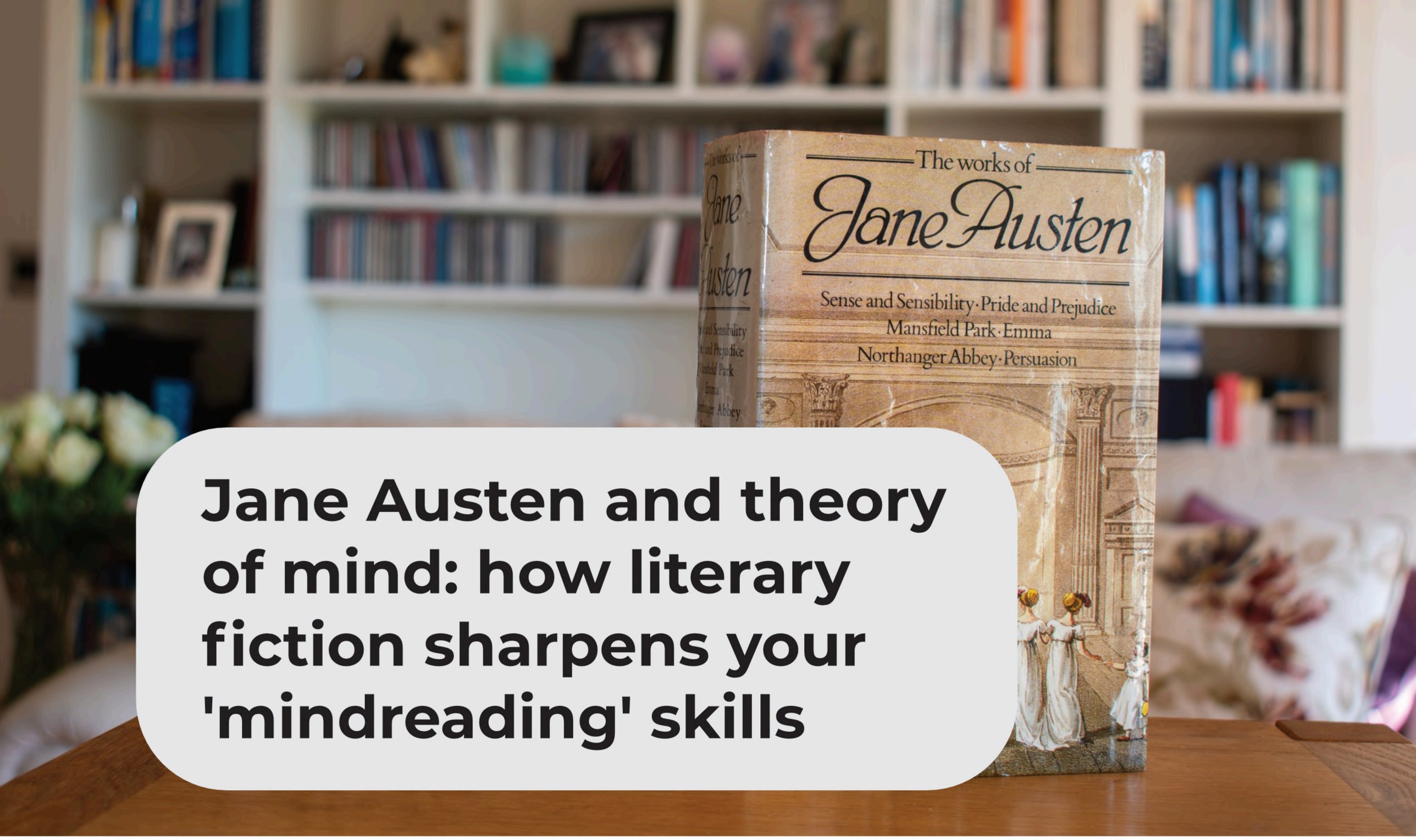
In any case, we should all be careful not to get wet. Or maybe don't – if Austen's plots are anything to go by, getting caught in a downpour might be just the thing that changes the course of your life forever.

Credit: C.E. Brock



Jane Austen and theory of mind: how literary fiction sharpens your 'mindreading' skills

By Carmen Barajas, Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology and Noelia López-Montilla, Psychologist and Researcher, University of Malaga

Credit: TTL Deez/Shutterstock

At the beginning of Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's most well-known novel, the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, overhears Mr Darcy speaking ill of her. This, naturally, leads her to form a negative opinion of him.

However, she is unaware of the real reasons behind his words, while Mr Darcy, for his part, does not realise that he has been overheard. Thus begins an emotional and mental dance between two characters, with each trying to decipher the other's thoughts and feelings over the course of the novel.

The reader, meanwhile, exists as an omnipresent third party, privy to the character's innermost thoughts. This means that the book's exercise in interpreting emotions not only takes place within the story itself, but also within the reader.

Austen and 'theory of mind'

Our enjoyment of literature and fiction is rooted in theory of mind: the cognitive ability to attribute mental states (intentions, desires, thoughts, emotions) to others and make sense of their behaviour. We all possess this capacity, and it is fundamental to any social relationship.

This skill is essential for understanding a narrative, since what we read would be meaningless without being able to put ourselves in the characters' shoes in order to discern the motives that drive their actions.

A 2013 study, published in the journal Science, found that reading

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fiction improves this ability. Austen's writing is particularly well-suited to training our "mindreading" skills.

Thinking about thoughts

Using plots based on misunderstandings, deception, irony and social expectations, Austen reflects the social psychology of her era – the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The minds of her characters are the centrepieces, and efforts to understand them drive conflict within the stories, creating characters with whom it is easy to empathise.

Therefore, in Pride and Prejudice, Austen not only presents a love story – she entangles the reader in a web of thoughts about thoughts, a veritable tapestry of what is known as mental recursion. This concept, central to theory of mind, refers to our ability to represent the mental states of others in our own minds, and to do so on multiple levels or "orders".

First-order recursion is straightforward – it occurs when Elizabeth says that she knows her sister Jane is unhappy. But Austen rarely stops there, as her novels develop much more complex structures.

This can include the following: Elizabeth thinks Darcy believes she is interested in Wickham. This is third-order recursion, as it involves the thoughts of three different characters: the protagonist, the co-protagonist, and the man with whom they both have a connection. At key moments in the novel, these levels overlap, generating misunderstandings, tensions and narrative twists, all of them laden with meaning.

This type of complex mental reasoning is not only what defines the characters – the reader also participates in it. In order to understand the misunderstandings in certain scenes, the reader needs to know more than the characters themselves – as well as what the characters believe the others know, and what they do not know that they are unaware of.

This means that when Elizabeth reads Darcy's letter, given to her after she has rejected him, the reader has to work alongside her to reorder all previous levels of interpretation: what she thought he felt, what he thought she felt, the intentions she thought he had, and the intentions she now believes he has.

Cognitive psychology suggests that the human mind can comfortably handle up to three levels of recursion. Literary fiction, especially that which explores complex interpersonal relationships, is a natural way to train this ability. In this sense, reading Austen is like lifting mental weights. Her characters invite us to think with them, about them, and sometimes against them.

Hearing others' thoughts

One of the most powerful devices Austen uses to immerse us in her characters' minds is free indirect speech.

This narrative technique acts as a

bridge between the narrator and the characters, granting access to their ideas and emotions without explicitly labelling them as such. Free indirect speech eliminates the marks of thought, and presents it as a fluid part of the narrative discourse without indicating the change in perspective.

In these types of sentences, it is not entirely clear whether it is the narrator or the character speaking. It is precisely this ambiguity that forces us, as readers, to frequently activate our theory of mind, since we must infer who is speaking, what they are really thinking, whether or not they are telling the truth, and whether there is a contradiction between what they say and what they feel.

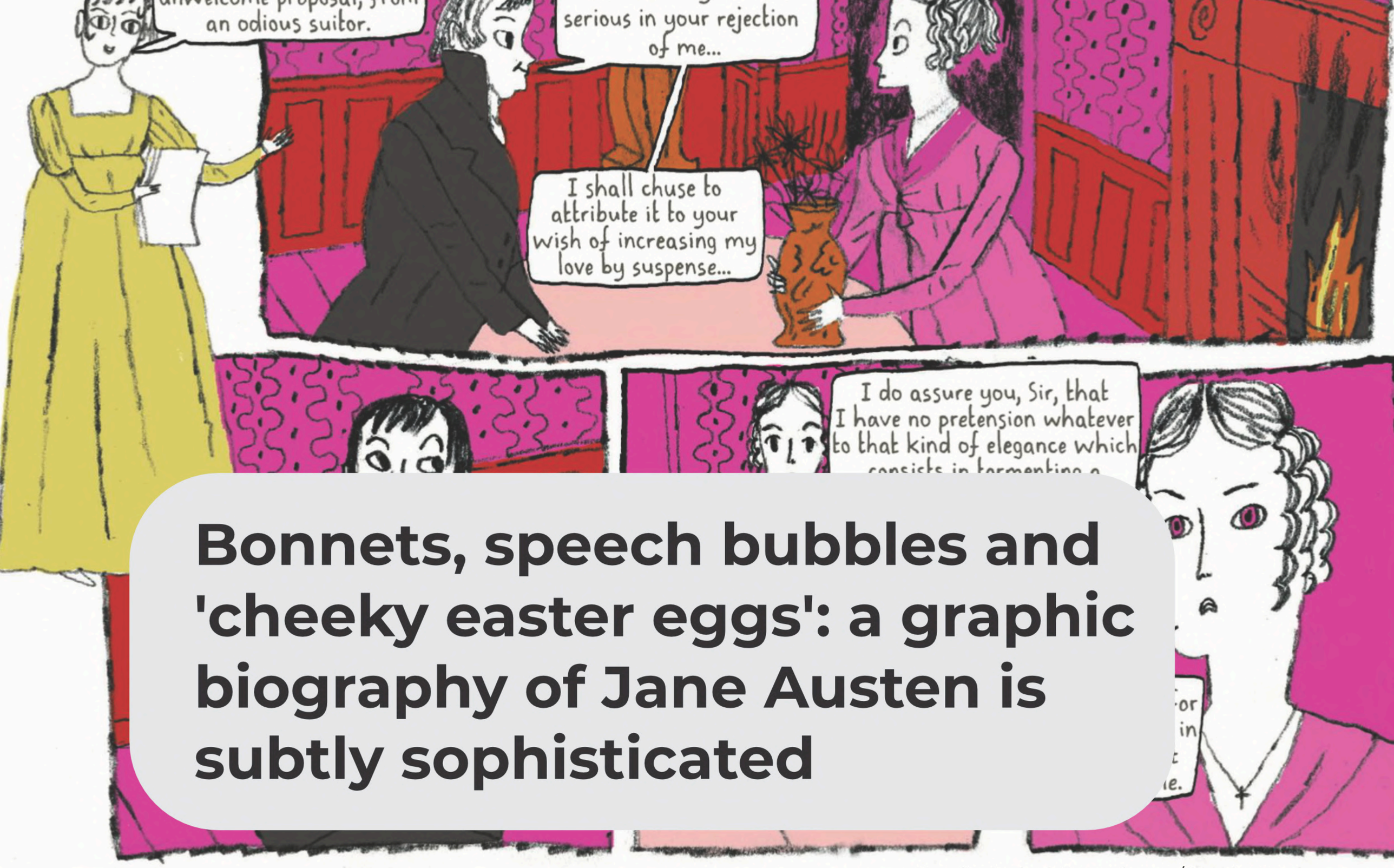
This form of narration is training in "mind reading" because, since the characters' thoughts are not stated directly, we have to reconstruct them. In other words, free indirect speech not only shows what a character is thinking – it forces us to think like them, at least for a few pages.

A way to understand other people

To read Jane Austen is to lose oneself in intricate layers of hidden thoughts and emotions, and this trains our unconscious abilities. Through free indirect speech and multiple levels of recursion, the writer allows the reader to enter the mind of each of the characters, and to feel like any other member of the peculiar society she portrays in her works.

In psychology, we know that this immersion does not happen by chance, as when we read, we activate and exercise a crucial skill for navigating the minds of others. Reading Austen's works is not only a source of entertainment – it also subtly refines our ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes (and heads).

This may be the reason why reading – even works that are more than two centuries old – never goes out of style.



Bonnets, speech bubbles and 'cheeky easter eggs': a graphic biography of Jane Austen is subtly sophisticated

Credit: Isabel Greenberg / Hachette

By Kerrie Davies, Senior Arts Lecturer, University of New South Wales Sydney

This year is the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth and she hasn't aged a bit as the cultural touchstone of classy romance. Her Pride and Prejudice anti-hero, Mr Darcy, perennially pops up in his breeches in Instagram memes, while Regency feminist, Elizabeth Bennet has been brought to life by a host of contemporary actors.

Along with new screen versions of Austen's Sense and Sensibility (starring Daisy Edgar-Jones) and a Netflix version of P & P, there have been adaptations of her classics Persuasion, Emma, Northanger Abbey, and Mansfield Park. And, there are numerous biographies and biopics including a TV drama about Jane's sister, Cassandra, who burned most of Jane's letters.

Now, there is also a graphic biography: The Novel Life of Jane Austen, written by Janine Barchas and illustrated by Isabel Greenberg.

Together, they have co-created a storyboard for the domestic life that framed Austen's writing, encompassing her closeness to both Cassandra and her brother Frank, who joined the navy and liked to sew.

Unlike a "cradle to grave" biography, Barchas begins with a teenage Jane in London with Frank touring an exhibition about Shakespeare and his work. We then follow her, in illustrative comic boxes and speech bubbles, through her publishing rejections, her breakthrough debut Sense and Sensibility, and her rise to become one of most beloved writers in the canon of English literature.

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The book ends beyond the grave, flashing forward to the present, in a scene where contemporary fans – Janeites – visit Jane Austen's House, the cottage in Hampshire where Austen lived when she revised and published her six novels.

It's also a sign of subtle structural polish. Now Jane Austen is as deserving of her own gallery as Shakespeare was when we first met Jane as a young, unpublished author.

Thinking in pink

Barchas – an "Austenite", as Austen scholars are called – is the author of The Lost Books of Jane Austen, a study of the mass market editions of Austen's work. (The Novel Life touches on Austen's posthumous appeal with a scene where readers buy Austen books for one shilling at a railway station after her death, aged 41.)

She also wrote Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location and Celebrity, which links Austen's characters to well known locations and figures in her era.

Barchas is the co-creator of the interactive digital exhibition, What Jane Saw, which invites us to visit two art exhibitions witnessed by Jane Austen: the Sir Joshua Reynolds retrospective in 1813 or the Shakespeare Gallery as it looked in 1796. The Novel Life, however, is a more definitive life story. It's also best read in print (although it is available as an e-book) to appreciate Greenberg's illustrations and graphic format.

The Novel Life is a gentler, less dramatic style than traditional comics with six-pack superheroes or Japanese manga, similar to Greenberg's previous literary graphic biography foray, Glass Town, about the Bronte sisters.

For the Novel Life, Greenberg has drawn a world in which Austen is whimsical, with expressive eyes looming under her signature bangs. She and her sister Cassandra appear in bright yellow or blue empire line dresses.

Most scenes are illustrated in a muted palette of yellow, blue and grey. This palette, Barchas reflects in the preface, represents "the relative quiet of her (Austen's) life".

When Jane is thinking or writing however, the pages transform into vivid shades of pink to symbolise her imagination and inspiration. In these pages, The Novel Life is at its best, showing graphic biography can be both captivating and deceptively sophisticated.

Archival nods

Is a graphic biography really a biography in the conventional understanding of the genre? It can upset the perceived rules. Anticipating this, in the preface, Barchas reminds us:

Any biography of Austen, and there are many, exists at the intersection of speculation and research.

This book is at this intersection. While the dialogue is largely invented, it is grounded in Barchas' expertise and there is a glossary of sources at the end.

Throughout, there are also nods to the archive. Barchas begins with a scene of Jane in 1796 writing a letter to Cassandra at a desk while staying in London – one of the few not burnt.

A speech bubble quotes an extract from it:

Here I am once more in this scene of dissipation and vice, and I begin already to find my morals corrupted.

There are also Post-it style notes, separate to the bubbles, offering extra biographical context for readers less familiar with the intricacies of Austen's story. A key scene happens when Jane, 22, receives her first rejection by a publisher for her manuscript "First Impressions" and is comforted by the loyal Cassandra. The note reads:

Jane would carry out more than a decade and a half of revisions before she dared to offer the manuscript to another publisher, who released it in 1813 as Pride and Prejudice.

Because of their visual casualness, importantly the notes don't interfere with the intimate, engaging tone of the story.

'Easter eggs'

For Austen's committed "Janeite" fan base, Barchas promises "cheeky easter eggs" in the preface. Janeites can delight in well-quoted lines from the novels that appear as dialogue or a character's thoughts.

Look, for instance, for Jane reading at a dinner party from P & P: "It's a truth universally acknowledged ..." and "she is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me ...".

It's a truth universally acknowledged too that graphic biography can be confused with the graphic novel, now the third most popular literary genre in sales after general fiction and romance.

But, dear reader, there's a tradition of life writing in the medium. The Pulitzer Prize winning graphic biography/memoir, The Complete Maus, told Art Spiegelman's father's story of the Holocaust to his son, (Art) who struggled to understand his father. Maus portrayed Jewish people anthropomorphically as mice and Nazis as cats. It was described by The New Yorker "as the first masterpiece of comic book history".

Other high points in graphic biography include Peter Bagge's Woman Rebel, the story of birth control campaigner Margaret Sanger, published in 2013.

Not everyone will appreciate a work diverging so dramatically from the expectations of a traditional biography. And those who will most appreciate or scrutinise The Novel Life are yes, the Janeites and Austenites.

Regardless, Austen comes to graphic life in the mind and hands of Barchas and Greenberg. More generally, for those of us who like our biographies in vivid colour – literally – and enjoy experiments in nonfiction storytelling, it's a delightful reading experience, just like Jane Austen.

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