

Jane Austen and the Victorian Heroine

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For Devoney and the participants in the 2012 NEH Summer Seminar

“Jane Austen and Her Contemporaries”

PREFACE

“Jane Austen? Never heard of her.” Connecting our research on nineteenth-century literature and culture to the world around us—both at the University and beyond—can sometimes be difficult for scholars and teachers. Most people, even those who study literature, do not have a deep familiarity with topics such as the structure of a silver fork novel or the finer details of an English country dance. Jane Austen, though. Everyone has heard of Jane Austen, and everyone seems to know something about her works. They recall required reading in high school, or a date night movie, or a passing story on public radio. Indeed, for many academics, Jane Austen has provided a way to connect with students, friends, and family for whom literary scholarship might be obscure or just uninteresting.

The experience of seeing Jane Austen as a point of connection led me to wonder if she had always filled such a role for scholars and readers. This project has been an attempt to answer that question—to consider how a Victorian approach to Jane Austen might work and what it could reveal about the writer, her novels, and the century that followed her death. It feels particularly fitting to be completing this book as we approach the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen’s death in July 2017. Another century of responses, re-creations, and repurposing has intervened between the Victorians and this moment, but I leave that project to others. For my part, I am thankful for the time I have spent with Jane Austen, and I suspect her Victorian readers felt the same.

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ABBREVIATIONS

E	<i>Emma</i>
MP	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
NA	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
P	<i>Persuasion</i>
P&P	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
S&S	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>