

## The Hidden Jane Austen

JOHN WILTSHIRE, 2014

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In recent years scholars have offered predominantly historicist interpretations of Austen, in keeping with the enduring general trend in literary studies. The accomplished Austen scholar John Wiltshire offers no such monograph; he declares, unashamedly, that he is interested in what the novels reveal “about human motive and behaviour” as a result of the close textual analysis he provides (4). The results are rewarding, not least because they are informed by contemporary psychological theory. This engagement shields the work from any potential accusations of atheoretical self-indulgence. Indeed, *The Hidden Jane Austen* is a worthy addition to his Austen criticism portfolio. Wiltshire’s earlier books are *Jane Austen and the Body: “The Picture of Health”* (Cambridge, 1992) and *Recreating Jane Austen* (Cambridge, 2001); he is also the editor of *Mansfield Park* for the definitive Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen (General Editor Janet Todd). *The Hidden Jane Austen* scrutinises the heroines of her novels: in the main, each chapter concentrates on one, although two chapters are devoted to *Mansfield Park* (the first of the two examines Aunt Norris). In particular, Wiltshire focuses on the “hidden” Austen’s prose techniques in portraying the complexities of character psychology, methods which make the novels worth rereading.

The first chapter, “Into the open with Catherine Morland”, argues that *Northanger Abbey* is a work that is devoted “to the frank, clear and enlightened” (24). As a result, Wiltshire contends that the novel “is not a good example of the hidden Jane Austen” (27). That being the case, I wonder if *Northanger Abbey* needed its own chapter at all; it might have been dealt with as part of a more extended introduction. Chapter Two, “Elinor Dashwood and concealment”, probes the problematic relationship between the narrator and Elinor, for example the novel commends control, concealment (polite lies etc.) Of course, many critics before Wiltshire have picked up on these tensions in the novel, however he offers a generally illuminating analysis.

The third chapter, “Elizabeth’s memory and Mr Darcy’s smile”, explores how the novel probes “remembering and forgetting” (51). Here Wiltshire applies psychological theory on memory to enlighten our understanding of *Pride and Prejudice*. He reads Wickham’s initial conversation with Elizabeth, during which she recalls her memory of Darcy’s self-assessment to accord with Wickham’s portrayal of him, in light of psychologists’ “term ‘demand characteristics’”, whereby the interlocutor elicits the response they expect from the subject (58-9). Although Wiltshire risks the challenge of persuasion when he suggests Darcy’s memory of childhood is traumatic (70), overall this chapter offers a fresh perspective on the novel.

For me, the chapters on *Mansfield Park* are the highlights of the book, which is perhaps unsurprising given Wiltshire’s exemplary editing of the novel for Todd’s Cambridge Edition. In “The Religion of Aunt Norris”, Wiltshire shows how the narrative focalises beyond Fanny, offering a range of characters’ thoughts, which is unusual for Austen. However, this is not the case to such a degree with Mrs Norris. This demonstrates, Wiltshire contends, how Mrs Norris lacks the self-awareness and self-questioning of characters such as Fanny; what Mrs Norris says *is* how she sees herself, so we have no need to access her private feelings. Chapter five, “The Story of Fanny Price”, offers a sustained and compelling defence of

Austen's heroine in response to widespread denigration of her by critics. Wiltshire does an excellent job of showing how damaged psychologically Fanny is by her familial displacements; her emotional distress mutates into physical symptoms (100). His attentive close reading ranges from consideration of the symbolic significance of the East Room to acknowledgement of how Fanny's pain is registered by literary features such as "repetitions, dashes and exclamation marks" (111).

Chapter six, "Emma's overhearing", examines the importance of overhearing in the novel: readers see what Emma sees, and hear what she hears, so are able to attend to "other 'centres of self' ... while the illusion of occupying the mind of the heroine is unviolated" (129). The Box Hill incident is read productively in light of Bion's theory of group behaviour, however, how this relates to the central idea of overhearing might have been signposted more clearly. The final chapter, "Anne Elliot and the ambient world" focuses on how Anne is suffering from "chronic depression" which affects her cognitive awareness (147). To mirror her marginality, Anne's point of view is veiled from the reader, unlike heroines in the other novels, argues Wiltshire (148). As Anne's spirits improve, so do her "receptive capacities" (155). This chapter offers a cogent interpretation of the novel that rivals the quality of the *Mansfield Park* ones.

Overall, Wiltshire offers a deeply refreshing perspective on the novels in the current historicist-minded climate of literary criticism. His profound engagement with Austen's novels – a product of many years of research – is palpable on every page. Wiltshire offers sage and intelligent close readings of the novels that demonstrate effectively how psychologically complex Austen's heroines are, and how skilled a writer Austen is in her depiction of them. Although there might have been more use of established literary terminology in describing characters' consciousnesses, this does mean the study is free of specialist vocabulary that might put off the intelligent general reader. *The Hidden Jane Austen* will engage and intrigue a range of readers, including non-specialists, students and academics, inviting them to reread the novels in light of Wiltshire's analysis.

DR GILL BALLINGER  
Senior Lecturer in English  
Department of Arts and Cultural Industries  
University of the West of England  
2S207, Frenchay Campus  
Coldharbour Lane  
Bristol  
BS16 1QY  
[Gillian.Ballinger@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Gillian.Ballinger@uwe.ac.uk)