



Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style

D. A. Miller

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What is the world-historical importance of Jane Austen? An old maid writes with the detachment of a god. Here, the stigmatized condition of a spinster; there, a writer's unequalled display of absolute, impersonal authority. In between, the secret work of Austen's style: to keep at bay the social doom that would follow if she ever wrote as the person she is.

For no Jane Austen could ever appear *in* Jane Austen. Amid happy wives and pathetic old maids, we see no successfully unmarried woman, and, despite the multitude of girls seeking to acquire "accomplishments," no artist either. What does appear is a ghostly No One, a narrative voice unmarked by age, gender, marital status, all the particulars that make a person--and might make a person peculiar. The Austen heroine must suppress her wit to become the one and not the other, to become, that is, a person fit to be tied in a conjugal knot. But for herself, Austen refuses personhood, with all its constraints and needs, and disappears into the sourceless anonymity of her style. Though often treasured for its universality, that style marks the specific impasse of a writer whose self-representation is impossible without the prospect of shame.

D.A. Miller argues this case not only through the close reading that Austen's style always demands, but also through the close writing, the slavish imitation, that it sometimes inspires.

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