

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.3 (WINTER 2019)

Yelland, Cris. *Jane Austen: A Style in History*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 234 pp.

Reviewed by Lindsey Seatter, University of Victoria

<1>Cris Yelland's *Jane Austen: A Style in History*, as the title aptly suggests, presents a detailed, at-length discussion of Austen's style within its historical context.

<2>Yelland's critical monograph oscillates between two larger critical conversations. First, Yelland joins the chorus of foundational historicist Austen studies such as Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* and Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate* by bringing a renewed approach now some 40 years later. In addition, Yelland positions himself alongside more modern evaluations of Austen's language, as is showcased in Massimiliano Morini's *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques* and Tiekken-Boon van Ostade's *In Search of Jane Austen*. It is through this blend of historical and linguistic methods that Yelland's book productively intervenes in the arena of Austen scholarship.

<3>Yelland organizes his study into seven different chapters that, as the author iterates, can be understood in three parts. The first part—composed of the monograph's initial two chapters—works to trace the eighteenth-century prescriptivist movement and place Austen's writing in this context. While Yelland does not propose that Austen's alignment with some prescriptivist thinkers equates to her unequivocal acceptance of this linguistic model, he does argue that understanding the influence of prescriptivism helps to illustrate “the state of thinking about the English language” (4) at the time that Austen was reaching her formative writing years. Yelland summarizes the essential characteristics of prescriptivism, such as shorter sentences and periodic syntax, and asserts that Austen's fiction has roots in these “principles of formality” (11-12). In Chapter Two Yelland further showcases the effects of “historical distance” (30) and Austen's eighteenth-century foundations in his consideration of her abstract style and synonymous language. While I found Yelland's argument about the absence of metaphor in Austen unconvincing, his rigorous approach to Austen's lexis made his argument in that area quite persuasive.

<4>As Yelland asserts, “Austen wrote her novels in a cultural context of tension” (11) and the second part of his monograph intentionally juxtaposes the first by diving into a study of orality—specifically reading aloud, which the author describes as being the “antithesis to prescriptivism's thesis” (4). Yelland works through the social and cultural history of reading aloud, and the influence of reading aloud on Austen's particular syntactical and narratological schema, over the course of three chapters. In Chapter Three, Yelland explores the importance of reading aloud both within the Austen household and within Regency-era cultures more generally. For the Austens, communal reading was a “common and highly valued part of family life” (63) and served as a form of social entertainment; however, Yelland demonstrates that this activity was not just insular, but that the larger elocution movement also had a considerable effect on

Austen's style. He cites conduct literature by James Fordyce, Erasmus Darwin, and Sarah Howard that all underscore reading aloud as a "valuable accomplishment" (69). In Chapter Four, Yelland investigates "the opposing cultural forces" (120) of print culture and oral culture on Austen's writing. He begins with the common assumption that Austen was influenced by Samuel Johnson and then traces the presence of 'Johnsonian style' across Austen's novels. Through comparing and contrasting syntax, Yelland ultimately concludes that Johnson's influence on Austen's style is best characterized as "complex" (99). In fact, Yelland demonstrates that the adherence to Johnsonian formalism and compression is uneven across Austen's oeuvre: the Steventon novels and the Chawton novels exhibit strong differences. Chapter Five continues to explore Austen's authorial shift by considering how the 'early' and 'late' novels showcase Austen's evolving experimentation with narrative, thought, and speech. It is in this chapter that Yelland introduces the ideas of "hybrid formation" (130), "deviant styles" (134), and free indirect discourse. As Yelland admits, free indirect discourse "has attracted by far the most critical comment and discussion" (136), and therefore he begins by summarizing the most foundational criticism in the discipline and outlining the key grammatical features of the style. By Chapter Six, Yelland has adequately sketched free indirect discourse as a narrative movement and moves into what he terms a "developmental account" (153) of Austen's free indirect style. He begins very briefly with the juvenile writings before presenting substantive analyses of three novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. For Yelland, each of these texts plays a role in Austen's great experiment: *Sense and Sensibility* works through identifying a point-of-view, *Mansfield Park* showcases a "massive change" in Austen's writing in its layering of voices, and *Emma* captures "the best of Jane Austen" in its closeness between narrator and character.

<5>Finally, the closing chapter presents a "discussion of the nineteenth-century reception of Austen's work" (7) and considers her position as a novelist during the dramatically different Victorian period. Yelland argues that the nineteenth century reconstructed Austen as a domesticated female writer by suppressing her eighteenth-century roots—making her into a "wholly one-sided figure" (192). Concurring with B.C. Southam, Yelland determines that the "most important single event" (192) in the Victorian reception of Austen was the 1870 publication of J.E. Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Austen's penchant for reading aloud made her "safe for Victorian tastes" (204). Yelland underscores that the "Victorian response to Jane Austen was a hugely selective one" (205) that erased her as the "product of the confluence of two quite different things" (205): writtenness and orality.

<6>Yelland's use of extended textual examples is to be applauded; his detailed attention to the contents of Austen's writing is exciting. I contend that to effectively illustrate how style operates in the manner you are often required to analyze lengthy quotations, beyond the commonly acceptable three or four lines. Yelland's selected excerpts are thoughtful and successfully demonstrate the syntax, lexis, and literary devices that characterize Austen's inimitable style. By dedicating substantial physical and intellectual space to Austen's writing, Yelland demonstrates that her work remains at the centre of his critical study. Furthermore, I found the note listings at the end of each chapter, in addition to the bibliography at the end of the publication, a very useful set of resources. It seems that Yelland understands that, dependent on research interests, readers will approach this critical monograph either as a full body of work or as contained

chapters in a broader collection. By providing these two types of resource listings, the publication effectively caters to a diverse audience.

<7>In the closing of his monograph, Yelland cites both the macro- and micro-histories that encapsulated Austen's authorial career. While I found that some of the "broad-brush explanations" (207) were lacking, Yelland's extreme attentiveness to the micro-histories impacting Austen and Austen studies—the influence of prescriptivism, the emphasis on orality, eighteenth-century traditions, and nineteenth-century receptions—more than compensate for these gaps in general history. Additionally, while I remain incredibly impressed by Yelland's dedication to close reading, there were some chapters—in particular, Chapter Six on free indirect discourse—where his select approach to the novel's left certain blanks in the evolution of Austen's style. Given the relatively small body of work that Austen completed and the relatively short window in which she was actively writing, it seems that each novel should be identified as having a significant role in her transformation as an author—by missing novels, we are missing the arc. Because of this, I desired to read Yelland's comments on the three excluded texts—*Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*. However, in the novels he does choose, Yelland's concentrated, comprehensive close reading is satisfying for both Austen scholars and enthusiasts.

<8>Overall, in the ever-popular field of historicist Austen scholarship, Yelland's *Jane Austen: A Style in History* makes a great contribution in its examination of how particular cultural movements impacted Austen's particular writing moment. This book is certainly welcomed as an updated, attentive addition to the intersecting fields of literary stylistics and Austen studies.