

Portraits in the Novels of Jane Austen

For each of the novels I compiled three documents:

- A selection of relevant passages generated by a list of keywords
- A survey, based on a range of databases, of the critical responses to each novel, with special emphasis on books/articles focused on portraits, arts, perception, the gaze, spectatorship, and visibility
- A compilation of passages depicting the first time each character is introduced and their physical descriptions (if given), to explore how Austen creates our 'first impressions' of her characters and the implications of their appearance.

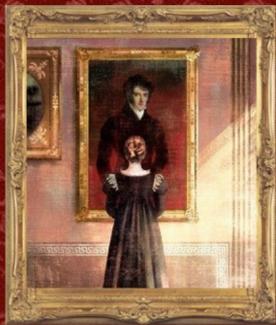


The passages generated by keywords such as *likeness*, *resemblance*, *copy*, and *represent*, revealed that while Austen has a scene including a physical portrait in each of her novels, she consistently integrates the vocabulary of portraiture throughout her novels to show how her characters view themselves and those around them. Portraiture becomes a way to explore such integral issues as the subjectivity of individual perception and experience, the difficulty of interpreting character, and the changing dynamic of familial, platonic, and romantic relationships.



Elizabeth is influenced by the flattering verbal portrait she has just heard from Darcy's housekeeper as she compares the image to her memory of the original. Strikingly, Elizabeth's acknowledged change of heart occurs not with the gaze of the man himself, but through an artificial likeness of him.

- *Pride and Prejudice*



Captain Benwick has his miniature portrait framed for his new fiancée, even though it was originally intended for another. Benwick's portrait remains static, whereas his affections have altered. The discussion of this leads to Wentworth's subsequent profession of constancy and continued love for the heroine Anne.

- *Persuasion*



Jessica A. Volz

"The portrait's superior expressive quality lies in its ability for self-expression at a time when the strictures on the seen and the unseen, the said and the unsaid scripted women's lives in fiction and in actuality"

- Jessica A. Volz



"the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a brush"

2017 marked the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's death and one instance of commemoration was the printing of her portrait on the new ten pound note. Fittingly, this project undertook an analysis of Austen's six major novels through the lens of portraits. During Austen's lifetime portraiture was no longer restricted to the aristocracy and artists were engaged in redefining the representation of class, identity, and gender. In a manner typical of her subtle style, Austen skilfully utilises portraits in her work as a vehicle to convey her characters' evolving perceptions of themselves and each other, thereby registering the changes in her contemporary context.

The wider critical framework of this project included research about:

- Austen's language of the visual arts in her letters
- Criticism likening Austen to a painter
- Portraiture in the Georgian/Regency period
- Drawing as a Regency female accomplishment
- Portraiture in other literature of the time
- The role of the visual arts in literature
- Artists on portraiture, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*.



Mary Wollstonecraft



Catharine Macaulay



Hester Chapone

Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Chapone argued that girls should have the freedom to pursue drawing and painting, but they discouraged the practice of drawing for the dubious plaudit of 'being accomplished'. Austen's most artistically talented heroine is Elinor Dashwood who labours earnestly, whereas Emma lacks the ability to apply herself and attempts portraits only for praise, or as part of her social machinations.

"Confine not the education of your daughters to what is regarded as the ornamental parts of it, nor deny the graces to your sons"

- Catharine Macaulay

Austen's focus on representation, subjectivity, and identity remains markedly relevant in our image obsessed society. Like Benwick's miniature, a screensaver of a loved one can be kept for private perusal, displayed to others, but also changed if needed. Emma's depiction of Harriet as slightly taller and with longer eyelashes in her painting echoes a cheeky photoshop tweak.

