

Buried Secrets

The Hidden Jane Austen

By John Wiltshire.
Cambridge University Press, 2014. xii + 195 pages.
Paperback. \$27.99.

Review by Nicole Lobdell.

In his latest work, *The Hidden Jane Austen*, John Wiltshire embarks on new readings, or rather re-readings, of Austen's six completed novels. His discoveries reveal the dexterity with which Austen manages characters' memories and maneuvers readers' attentions. The "hidden" of Wiltshire's title refers not to Austen's personal secrets but rather to the secret motives, or hidden agendas, of her characters, some of which even they are unaware. As evidence, Wiltshire employs extended close readings, calling attention to Austen's language, punctuation, and sentence structure, to demonstrate how her "characters protect themselves from knowing themselves and their motives." This is the hidden Jane Austen that Wiltshire seeks to expose.

Each novel occupies "its own distinct ethos and imaginative co-ordinates" and "[r]ather than co-opting each" narrative into "an overmastering argument," Wiltshire develops the individual chapters independently of another. The result is seven chapters (two devoted to *Mansfield Park*), offering separate, idiosyncratic arguments responding to each of the novels. In his close readings, Wiltshire focuses on moments of internal reverie, introspection, and self-examination. These are the moments, he suggests, where Austen structures her narrative to occlude knowledge from her readers, or in which her heroines, such as Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price, use or refuse language in order to disavow painful truths. Their terse responses and silences, he argues, speak volumes. Wiltshire does not focus solely on Austen's heroines; his interpretation of *Mansfield Park*'s Mrs. Norris is particularly well done. She is simply "Austen's most egregious example of

a personality able to bury truths about herself."

Perhaps the most provocative lines of inquiry are in the two chapters Wiltshire commits to *Mansfield Park*. In the first, he argues that Austen's depiction of characters' inner lives draws upon the Protestant belief that moral salvation is attainable through self-examination. In the second, he exposes the narrative as one of displacement, suggesting it is a precursor to our contemporary narratives of emigration and transplantation. Wiltshire connects these lines of argument with *Mansfield Park* in several ways: through Austen's rendering of characters' inner lives (of which, he declares, Mrs. Norris possesses none), through the presence of the slave trade in the novel, and through Fanny Price's psychological pain of adoption and displacement. Removed from her home, her family, and her purpose, Fanny Price suffers a trauma at the deepest level of her consciousness; her repeated self-examinations in the east room are, Wiltshire suggests, attempts at self-healing. Despite the novel's connection with the slave trade, Wiltshire resists readings of Fanny as a "transported commodity," as previous scholars, notably Edward Said, have done. Instead, he insists that we, Austen's readers, have not been reading with intention; we have not looked deep enough beneath the exterior of Fanny Price: "our awareness of the traumas of displacement and adjustment might dispose us to consider the case of Fanny Price more attentively and sympathetically... to the hidden impact of her removal as it affects her life at Mansfield." Wiltshire's reading of Mrs. Norris and Fanny Price, perhaps the most maligned of all of Austen's heroines, is compelling and well worth the two chapters he devotes to the novel.

In the final two chapters, Wiltshire examines Austen's construction of space through aural devices, namely that of overhearing, a device commonly associated with the theater. "Overhearing," he writes, is "more

ubiquitous in Jane Austen's novels than in the plays that she knew... In contrast to the theatre, the person overhearing is her focus... a l l o w [i n g] Austen to thread

other strands through a narrative that... channels the [main character's] consciousness." The aural experience of overhearing links Austen's *Emma* and *Persuasion* in unexpected ways. In *Emma*, overhearing is the "ligature between... communal interaction and the experience of [the individual]." In *Persuasion*, however, overhearing becomes the vehicle by which Austen transcends the barriers separating Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. In early drafts of the ending, Austen failed to redress the heroine's silences within the text. With her revision, however, Austen reverses the gendered roles of speaker and listener—Anne becomes the active speaker and Wentworth the passive listener. Wiltshire's reading of overhearing, a device he identifies as simultaneously entailing proximity and distance, offers a new understanding not only of the revised ending to *Persuasion* but also of the intimate connection between Austen's last completed novels.

The Hidden Jane Austen is not only about the hidden agendas of Austen's heroines—it is also about our own buried secrets and how Austen reveals us to ourselves. Perhaps we return to Austen, re-reading her novels, because she presents the truth to us, and the truth of us. A remarkably brief work that plumbs new depths, *The Hidden Jane Austen* will appeal to many readers, especially those interested in memory, cognitive theory, and gender studies.

Nicole Lobdell is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She is currently at work on a book about hoarding in nineteenth-century British literature.

