

Charlton, Linda. *Jane Austen and Reflective Selfhood: Rereading the Self*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 259 pp. 978-3-031-12159-3

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The scholarly discourse surrounding Jane Austen is ever growing. One of its most frequently discussed topics is related to her remarkable ability to portray the complexities of human relationships. In 2020 Tom Keymer published his book *Writing, Society, Politics* on Austen and addressed the scholarly criticism of her novels, including feminism, narrative techniques, and politics. In the same year, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen* was published electronically to reach a wider audience. Linda Charlton's book *Jane Austen and Reflective Selfhood: Rereading the Self* is a contribution to this tradition; however, her analysis examines Austen's works through the lens of eighteenth-century philosophies of selfhood. Charlton argues that Austen's works interact with fundamental problems of individual identity and moral judgment. She delves into the complexities of Austen's characters and their journeys of self-discovery to show how Austen provides an insight into the nature of selfhood and personal transformation. Furthermore, Charlton relates the reading practices of characters to their capacity for self-recognition. The book's eight chapters provide detailed close readings of Austen's fiction, allowing readers to explore the nuances and intricacies of her characters and their journeys of self-formation.

The introductory chapter of the monograph, "Selfhood and the Novel," lays the theoretical foundation of Charlton's main argument. The works of Locke, Hume, and Adam Smith are referenced for their understanding of the role memory and imagination play in creating an individual's sense of self (27). Chapter Two, "Memory: Continuity, Coherence and Self-Construction," examines the sense of self developed by the heroines of four novels by Austen. Charlton introduces the ways in which Locke and Hume emphasize the importance of memory in determining one's identity and self-construction, as "we are, in effect, what we remember about ourselves" (36). Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennett, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot all engage with their memories to shape their sense of identity and establish a coherent understanding of themselves. One of the most fascinating arguments of this chapter concerns *Persuasion*, the novel usually referred to as having been written by the mature Austen. Charlton shows how this maturity is reflected in the protagonist's approach to memories. Unlike other heroines, Anne regulates her recollections of the past, which leads to self-knowledge. By juxtaposing how each character reflects on the past, Charlton calls attention to the transformative power of self-reflection and memory in Jane Austen's works.

The third chapter, “Imagination and the Creative Self: The Reader and the Writer,” examines imagination and the creative self in Austen’s novels and philosophy. Locke and Hume cautioned against the consequences of “unregulated imagination” (69), as in Enlightenment philosophy imagination was seen as a constituent of selfhood. Charlton argues that imagination complements reason in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. Her reading highlights the creativity of the protagonists and interprets their attitudes in the context of the contemporary debates about reading. She argues that Catherine’s misreading of the events in *Northanger Abbey* can be better understood if observed from the perspective of the philosophy of selfhood, according to which “both identity and judgment arise from the accumulation of experience” (74). In Charlton’s view, this experience originates from Catherine’s reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. A later novel, *Emma*, highlights the paradoxical nature of imagination, which arises from two opposing views on reading: whether one should indulge in “serious reading,” or in “creative imagination.” Here, the heroine chooses creative imagination to “fill the approaching void in her life” (83). Emma denies certain facts so that reality comply with her desired narratives. The conclusion of the novel in terms of the philosophical debate on imagination is that both aspects are necessary to find the truth about life.

In addition to memory and imagination, Charlton examines the concept of probability in the works of Austen. In the fourth chapter, “Proofs, Probabilities and Ambiguities,” Charlton asserts that Austen explores the power of the probable and the improbable, which can be seen not only in the content of the novels but in their style as well. Memory, imagination and probability shape self-formation and judgment. Charlton shows how Austen’s use of different narrative techniques subverts the reader’s expectations. She also provides a detailed analysis of how society’s expectations are subverted in Austen’s works, most notably in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. The first subchapter examines the ways in which the probability of judgment plays a significant role in the lives of the protagonists. Elinor and Elizabeth must learn to take the improbable into account when evaluating and judging matters. The second subchapter focuses on the narrative styles of *Lady Susan*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Mansfield Park*. Charlton notes that the range of narrative techniques used by Austen leads to ambiguities which, because they oppose the probable, subvert readers’ expectations.

Chapter Five of Charlton’s book, “Sympathy: Self and Society,” examines Austen’s portrayal of the multi-dimensional self. According to Charlton, Austen addresses this tension in the same manner as Adam Smith does in his work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Charlton emphasizes that “Austen revisits the concept of sympathy throughout her writing and each representation exemplifies Smith’s focus on the significance of context” (138). Her analysis of *Lady Susan*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma* reveals that the characters’ ability of judgment is essential when sympathy is inhibited by an unwillingness to consider other points of view. The protagonists of these novels fail to perform sympathy effectively. They act, Charlton argues, according to Smith’s beliefs when they make objective judgments through regulating sympathy. However, by so doing, they go against societal expectations by learning that true moral value can be concealed by charm and is not equivalent to social position and wealth. The sixth chapter, “The Reflecting Self: Self-Examination

and Moral Judgement,” examines the interplay between feeling, reflection, and judgment. Charlton’s insight, in line with Smith’s ideas, is that taking into account the perspective of others is essential for objective self-examination. She not only aligns Austen’s portrayal of the reflective self with Smith’s concept of the agent and judge, but also presents a challenge to the predominant emphasis on free indirect discourse as a definitive indicator of self-examination. While free indirect discourse is often seen as a reliable indicator of self-examination, Charlton expands her analysis to include additional narrative techniques such as psycho-narration and quoted monologues. By doing so, she provides a more comprehensive exploration of the characters’ introspection and offers a deeper understanding of their moral judgment.

“Reflection, Reading Practice and Self-Formation” is the most complex and compelling chapter of the book. Here, Charlton effectively ties together the overarching themes of her analysis. What makes this chapter particularly interesting is its inclusion of not only Austen’s six renowned novels but also her juvenile works. By broadening her scope of analysis, Charlton uncovers a compelling dimension of Austen’s work: she argues that Austen’s fiction “accentuates the practice of reading as it applies to the interpretation of both text and character” (214). Critics often point out that in *Northanger Abbey* Henry’s dismissal of his father’s cruelty shows that he misreads people, similarly to Catherine. Charlton joins this discussion and states that “Catherine’s reading is in the end more critical than Henry’s because it is informed by her experience as a young woman in a patriarchal society: she therefore sees the deeper, more sinister implications of what he dismisses as a good read” (225). Although I agree that Catherine’s experiences make her a critical reader, the claim that she is more critical than Henry seems to be an exaggeration. Charlton argues that Catherine relies on her experiences as a young woman and interprets the General’s acts on these grounds. This ability shows that Catherine has “learned to read critically, balancing feeling with reason” (226). However, it may also be argued that Henry does the same when he defends his father. He might fail to judge his father’s character objectively, but this has more to do with respect for his father or, better to say, the power dynamic within the family rather than his reading practices. He initially makes the evaluation of his father’s actions based on his knowledge of the same patriarchal society. However, Henry later changes his judgment because of the General’s mistreatment of Catherine. Also, Charlton goes beyond the literary aspects of Austen’s novels and reflects on the gendered assumptions surrounding reading in the eighteenth century. She convincingly argues that Austen applied Smith’s theory of critical distance, and her characters challenge contemporary attitudes towards the act of reading. The chapter successfully captures the complexity of Austen’s literary world while offering thought-provoking insights into the transformative power of reading and its relevance to the interpretation of both text and character.

The concluding chapter, “The Effect of a Second Perusal,” ties together the book’s main arguments and emphasizes how Jane Austen’s work engages with fundamental questions about individual identity and moral judgment, which find their roots in the philosophy of selfhood. By skillfully intertwining the exploration of selfhood with a unique narrative style, Austen’s works challenge readers to critically analyze both the characters within her novels and their own understandings of the world. The

conclusion serves as a call to actively engage with Austen's texts, inviting readers to reflect upon and explore the profound themes and questions raised by their encounters with her literary works.

One of the most notable strengths of the book *Jane Austen and Reflective Selfhood: Rereading the Self* lies in Linda Charlton's ability to situate Austen's novels within the time's broader literary and philosophical context. Charlton's book offers a fresh perspective on Austen's works, inviting readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery alongside Austen's beloved characters. Including *Lady Susan* and her juvenile writings in the list of analyzed works is a valuable addition to the book and helps to emphasize these early pieces' relevance in Austen scholarship. Through her analysis, Charlton highlights how memory, imagination, probability, sympathy, and self-examination contribute to the characters' self-formation and moral judgment.