“I was a little mortified to find you had not admitted the name of Miss Austen into your list of favorites…I count on your making some apology for this omission.”

--Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall in a letter to Joseph Story (1826)

English 501: Jane Austen

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During her lifetime (1775-1817) Jane Austen enjoyed a modest albeit devoted following. Her work received a total of thirteen reviews, each fairly positive. Since her demise, Austen’s readership has grown exponentially; her novels are now among the most popular in English. They have been printed in myriad editions, translated into many languages, and adapted for film and television. Austen societies have formed, and there are frequent academic conferences and panels devoted to her corpus.An ever-expanding Austen bibliography rivals those of William Shakespeare and John Milton. But among scholars, Austen’s work generates a fascinating lack of consensus; literary critics of all schools claim her as their own while disagreeing about what her fiction means. Even scholars of similar affiliations reach different conclusions about her novels, particularly their endings.

For subsequent novelists, Austen is an emulative model. Comic writers borrow (i.e., steal) from her plots. Her verbal economy inspires revisers everywhere: “I am inclined to say in desperation, read it yourself and kick out every sentence that isn’t as Jane Austen would have written it,” the poet Ezra Pound advised his colleague Laurence Binyon in 1938, adding that this was, of course, impossible. The modernist luminary Virginia Woolf called her “the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal.” She commented on Austen’s “elusive quality...made up of very different parts, which it needs a peculiar genius to bring together.” Post-modernist Anglophone novelists like Edward St. Aubyn have adapted these parts to their own ends, using her comically restrained narrative tone and innovative use of perspective to write fiction that is subjective, humorous, and socially critical.

We can’t expect to arrive at a single interpretation of Austen. Our work is to understand her narrative art by isolating the “parts” Woolf alluded to. Toward this end, we proceed chronologically, reading three of the six mature novels, and paying close attention to style. Class discussion focuses on Austen’s sentences and plot structures as well as her novels’ incorporation of other genres. Lectures touch on how Austen’s work registers political and cultural events in Britain.

Required Texts:

*Sense and Sensibility* (Ed. Kathleen James-Cavan)

*Pride and Prejudice* (Ed. Robert P. Irvine)

*Emma* (Ed. Kristin Flieger Samuelian)

*Persuasion* (Eds. Janet Todd and Antje Blank)

The texts are all Broadview editions, which have excellent explanatory footnotes. Please use these editions.

Course Requirements:

--- Attend and remain for the duration of all classes.

**--- An illness or emergency-related absence does not excuse you from coming prepared to the next class. Please get a list of five classmates whom you can contact to find out what you missed, get notes from, and learn what comes next. You’re free to e-mail me, but please don’t expect a recapitulation of the lecture and/or discussion you missed.**

**--- Don’t come to class if you’re sick. Specifically, if you are in the first seven days of an illness -- symptomatic and contagious -- don’t enter the classroom. If you do, you will be asked to leave.**

**--- After five unexcused (non-illness or emergency-related) absences, you’ll automatically receive the grade of F.**

Reading: Read every assignment and participate in a way that demonstrates familiarity with it. Don’t bother with online summaries or movies. They don’t begin to capture Austen’s complexity and often distort her work badly, adding scenes that aren’t there and removing essential ones.

Exams: There are three quizzes. All but one consist of identifications, using passages that are the subject of class discussion and/or absolutely essential to a novel’s plot: no curve balls. Your job is to identify and briefly analyze these excerpts.

Presentation: There is a 30-45-minute seminar-style presentation. It should make a claim of value about one short (no longer than three-page) section of the novel under discussion. Support for your claim comes from a close reading. You may use a scholar’s analysis of Austen to deepen and enhance your interpretation. If you wish, you can develop your position paper into a seven-page essay for extra credit, but this is not necessary.

Grading Breakdown: Twenty percent for each test, 20 percent for the oral presentation, and 20 per cent for class participation.

Class Decorum:

--- Bring the book under discussion to class.

--- Keep electronic devices (i.e., cellular phones, laptops, and kindles) turned off and out of sight. Exceptions are made for students with particular needs, who require these items. If this is your situation, please speak with me.

--- No food is permitted in class, but feel free to bring beverages.

Schedule of Readings:

01-13 Introductory remarks.

01-20 *Sense and Sensibility* *Vol. I*

01-27 *Sense and Sensibility Vol. II*

02-03 *Sense and Sensibility Vol. III*

02-10 *Pride and Prejudice Vol. I*.Take-home exam due.

02-17 *Pride and Prejudice Vol. I*

02-24 *Pride and Prejudice Vol. I*

03-03 *Emma, Vol. I*

03-10 *Emma Vol. II*

03-17 Spring Break: No Class

03-24 *Emma Vol. III.*

04-03 *Emma Vol. III.* Second exam (in class).

04-10 *Persuasion* *Vol. I*

04-17 *Persuasion* *Vol. II*

04-19 *Persuasion* *Vol. III*

04-24 *Persuasion Vol. IIII*

05-01 Read-a-thon. Third exam to be given on final examination date.