

Critical Reception

The new Jane Austen banknote is not universally embraced

John Bishop

IN SOME WAYS, the selection of Jane Austen for the United Kingdom's new £10 banknote seemed a safe choice. The British author of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* remains one of the country's most beloved figures, with a global community of devotees. Though she died more than two centuries ago, her novels grappled with issues that resonate today.

"Jane Austen was a fantastic and well-respected author and people love reading her books, but there is much more depth to her," Victoria Cleland, chief cashier of the Bank of England, told *F&D*. "She was very interested in women and society, power and leadership... She was probing some quite difficult social issues at the time."

The new note was unveiled at Austen's resting place, Winchester Cathedral, on July 18, 2017, the 200th anniversary of her death. In featuring her likeness on a banknote, the Bank of England

gave Austen the validation that it had previously bestowed upon her fellow literary giants Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare.

Yet not everyone was thrilled. The release of a new banknote is always a delicate exercise, but the stakes are raised when a figure as beloved as Austen is involved. So it was perhaps predictable that amid the national enthusiasm over the note's release, some of its most vocal critics were those who knew Austen's work the best.

Out of context

Austen scholars raised a number of concerns, ranging from the portrait of Austen on the bill (too demure for such a slyly transgressive writer) to the image of Godmersham Park, the home of her brother who was adopted by wealthy cousins, which struck some as misrepresenting the precariousness of Austen's financial and social standing, issues that energized her novels.

But far and away, scholars took greatest issue with the quotation chosen for the note: "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading." With these innocuous, even anodyne words, the Bank of England raised the hackles of scholars and Austen fans alike.

"To take a quotation from the mouth of an unlikeable, sneering character in *Pride and Prejudice* is pretty perverse," said Janet Todd, the general editor of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*.

The quote is a piece of dialogue spoken by Caroline Bingley, the main rival of the novel's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. A deceitful snob, Bingley actually has no love for reading. Ripping these words out of context struck many as a disservice to Austen.

Critics pounced upon the quote in the days following the bill's unveiling. Nevertheless, some have recognized that the Bank of England faced a formidable challenge in quoting Austen. While poets and philosophers speak for themselves, novelists speak through their characters, an act of ventriloquism that makes it difficult to find a

Expert Opinion

F&D asked some of the world's leading Austen scholars to choose a new quotation for the Austen £10. Here's what they suggested.

"Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure." —***Emma***

Selected by Claudia Johnson, professor at Princeton University, author of Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel

"Men have had every advantage in telling their own story... the pen has been in their hands." —***Persuasion***

Selected by Helena Kelly, author of Jane Austen, the Secret Radical

"It is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible." —***Northanger Abbey***

Selected by Janet Todd, critic, novelist, and former president of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge

"A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of." —***Mansfield Park***

Selected by Claire Harman, author of Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World

Bank of England



pithy statement that expresses the author's true beliefs. The task is fraught with difficulty when the writer's stock in trade is wit, satire, and irony.

"A banknote is all about trust, it's a promise to pay," said Deidre Shauna Lynch, a professor at Harvard University and editor of *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*. "But because Austen is such an ironic writer, it makes it harder than some writers to identify her with what's trustworthy."

In Jane We Trust

Nevertheless, the new Austen note has a number of features that enhance its trustworthiness as a store of value. Cleland described the bill as the product of a years-long iterative process between the Bank of England, the bill's printers, and the cash industry. The result is a banknote that harmonizes state-of-the-art technology with artistry.

The Austen £10 is the second UK banknote to be printed on polymer, which makes it more durable and difficult to counterfeit than its paper predecessor. The transition to polymer enabled a number of technological innovations, chief among which is a large see-through window that bears Queen Elizabeth's portrait.

Cleland highlighted several security features as representing a technological leap forward in currency design, including an image of Winchester Cathedral that appears in gold on the front of the note and silver on the back.

Affixing foil to what is essentially a piece of plastic is a challenge in its own right. But affixing a foil that has very different images on either side directly behind each other—as was done with the crown on the front of the bill and the copper book emblazoned with the letters "JA" on the back—marks a technological advance.

"The main thing that people are struck by is getting the right mix between science and aesthetics, and all on a tiny piece of plastic that you can fit in a wallet," Cleland said.

While it's impossible to know what Austen would think of the bill that bears her visage, for a novelist who wrote so candidly about money, class, and status, she'd probably find her selection on the £10 quite fitting. It was the same sum she was paid for her first novel. **FD**

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