Public Lecture and Discussion

29.04.21 | 16:00 — 18:00 | Via Zoom

Jane Austen, Universally Acknowledged

In Britain as in Germany, Jane Austen's rise to fame was neither sudden nor spectacular. It has taken an especially long time for her earliest writings to gain critical attention, let alone praise. Austen's global renown may be founded on six novels published within the narrow span of six years and two months, but she lived long enough and wrote a sufficient quantity of work in the course of three decades to have identifiable early, middle, and late phases in her authorial career. Or, to borrow the categories invoked by her first biographers, she began with 'juvenile tales' and 'childish effusions', moved on to 'betweenities', and ended with 'novels' proper. To consider the body of her work in this way is to progress directly from immaturity to maturity, from 'how she ought not to write' into 'the right direction'. The problem with this view of things is that it does not faithfully reflect the compositional record. Austen preserved, returned to, and revised her earliest unpublished works after she became a published author. The book-length fictions with which she made her name cannot be demarcated from the shorter juvenilia in terms of when they were composed, or according to their subject matter, or on the basis of their author's concern and affection for them. This lecture asks what it might mean to consider Austen's earliest writings as works of comparable status to those of her adulthood, and—more generally—how theories of authorial development can shape literary reputations at home and abroad.

Since 2007 Freya Johnston has been Associate Professor of English at Oxford University; her research and teaching centre on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. She was previously Senior Lecturer at the University of Warwick and a Junior Research Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge. She has published two books as well as chapters, essays, and review articles on Samuel Johnson. A new text of Jane Austen’s Teenage Writings, co-edited with Kathryn Sutherland, was published in the Oxford World’s Classics series in 2017. She is General Editor of The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, two further volumes of which will appear later this year. Her next book, Jane Austen, Early and Late, will be published in August by Princeton University Press.

Prof. Dr. Burkhard Niederhoff  Chair of Modern English Literature
Dr. Daniel McCann  Dr. Verena Minow