

Jane Austen in Japanese Literature: An Overview

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IN RECENT YEARS THE CROSS-CULTURAL SPREAD of Jane Austen's reputation has come to be recognized as one of the fields of Austen studies most relevant to the world's cultural situation today. The Spring 2008 number of this journal, which took "Global Jane Austen" as its theme, is a landmark in this growing interest. We wished to join this expanding subsection of global cultural studies when we presented the prototype of this paper at the "New Directions in Austen Studies" conference held at Chawton House Library.¹ Although we prepared this paper independently of the "Global Jane Austen" number, we found its two articles on Austen's reception in Japanese literature very illuminating. We particularly appreciated the analysis by Hogan and Brodey of the role of traditional Confucian domestic ideology in the assimilation process of Austen's fiction. While we acknowledge, with one important exception,² most of their points, we also feel that their largely sociological approach should be complemented by a more literary analysis, because this literary emphasis has guided the way the works of Austen have been read, interpreted, and assimilated as a source of new possibilities for Japanese fiction. To this purpose we first, under our joint authorship, give a historical overview of Austen's reception in Japanese literature, followed by individually-written assessments of three Japanese writers who made creative use of Austen's novels, and then end with a conclusion, again a joint composition.

We begin our historical survey with the observation that Austen's reputation has now been securely established among the Japanese reading public, as shown by the large number of translations circulating in the market. Currently there are as many as six versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, three versions each of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, and one of *Mansfield Park* in print. With the exception of *Mansfield Park*, they are published in cheap paperback editions, which can easily be found in the larger bookshops across the country. The paperback *Northanger Abbey* is now out of print, although a hardcover version exists. Japanese readers also have a *Collected Works*, aimed at the specialist market of teachers and literary scholars, which includes *Lady Susan*, *Sanditon*, *The Watsons*, and all of the juvenilia. The most recent event in the reception of Jane Austen in Japan has been the publication of Austen's selected *Letters* (2004), which, together with translations of Claire Tomalin's *Life* (1999) and Jon Spence's *Becoming Jane Austen* (2009), has done much to familiarize the Japanese reader with her background. A translation of Deirdre Le Faye's *Jane Austen: A Family Record* is also under way.

Our next observation is that Austen's high Japanese reputation was slow to establish itself. It may have simply followed the pattern in her homeland, where her fame took a long time to achieve its present height. Yet we can also explain this delay by pointing to circumstances peculiar to the Japanese response to Western culture.³

When the Meiji Restoration of 1868 ended the rule of the Shogun and opened the country to the outside world, the new era started with a wholesale importation of Western ideas and institutions. One of the first books to be translated from English was Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*, which immediately became a bestseller (1870). On a more literary level, the most popular translated novel in these years was Bulwer-Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers* (1878), a story of a young man's pursuit of political and literary success which exactly chimed with the aspirations of the up-and-coming young men who wished to ride the new wave of modernization and Westernization. Also popular were Scott's romantic novels, such as *The Bride of Lammermoor* (first translated into Japanese in 1880) and *Ivanhoe* (1886), partly because their romanticism shared some common features with the samurai romances of earlier times. In this febrile climate, at once utilitarian and romantic, there was not much chance of the subtle art of Jane Austen being appreciated.

In time the heat and dust of the Meiji Restoration settled, and Japanese intellectuals began to take stock of their cultural situation. One of the early teachers of English literature at Tokyo University was Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), an Irishman of half Greek descent and a creative writer in his own right, famous for his poetic sketches of Japanese life. He gave the first systematic lectures on English literary history at Tokyo University, and in one of his lectures he duly covered Jane Austen, whom he praised highly for her "Shakespearean" characterization. He also, however, expressed significant

reservations: “Still, I am not sure whether you could like Austen or not. . . [T]he kind of life described, the suffering and the follies described, would probably seem very strange to most of you” (533). Hearn thought that Austen was so remote culturally from his Japanese students that it would be difficult for them to empathize with her characters or appreciate her artistry. He was too much struck by the actual differences between East and West to consider their possible similarities, and anyway his creative bent was on the side of the lyrical and the intuitive. Later, as we will try to show, some Japanese writers did manage to combine Austen’s dry and precise portrayal of domestic life, which seemed to Hearn an insuperable barrier to her appreciation in Japan, with the lyrical and the intuitive, which lie at the base of the Japanese sensibility and with which Hearn felt a deep affinity.

There was another, literary-historical difficulty for a just appreciation of Austen for Japanese writers (and readers). When Hearn gave his lecture on Austen, many of his students were already attracted to the new deterministic version of realism practiced by Flaubert and Zola, as well as to the new social and existential ideas of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. All these writers were avidly read and hotly discussed by Japan’s new writers, who tried to model their works on these European novelists. Thus we have a strange chronological inversion, in which the works of Austen seemed to come later than those of writers who in fact came after her. It was a cultural situation in which most of Ibsen’s plays had been translated and some of them staged, before the first ever Japanese translation of an Austen novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, came out in 1926. It is not surprising that, compared with these champions of European modernity, the more restrained realism of the English tradition was widely regarded as old-fashioned and unadventurous. In this way, appreciation of Austen was hindered by Japan’s sense of cultural belatedness.

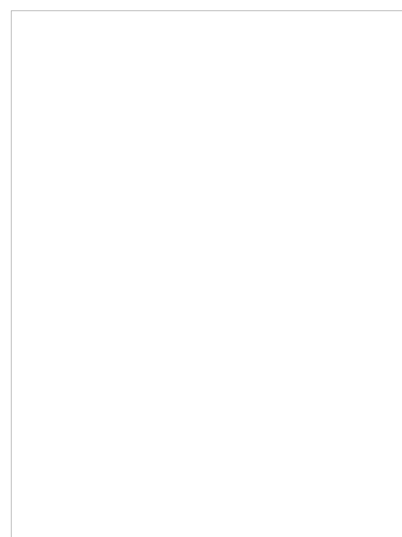
So it is all the more remarkable that Hearn’s successor at Tokyo University, the future novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), singled out Austen as a model novelist in preference to these seemingly more “advanced” writers. “Anyone who is unable to appreciate Austen will be unable to understand the beauty of realism,” he declared in his *Theory of Literature* (107). His championing of Austen makes him our first milestone in the history of the reception of Austen in Japan. He also famously based the literary ideal of his last years, that of *sokuten kyoshi* (follow Heaven, forsake the self) on Austen’s novels.

Sōseki is probably the greatest modern Japanese novelist,⁴ and his high evaluation of Austen as a novelist therefore carries great weight. Analysis of the use he made of Austen will be left to a later, separate treatment by [Amano](#) (Section 1). Here we limit ourselves to just one point. When in the same book Sōseki extols Austen as the “authority of realism” (107), his concept of realism would seem to be closer to the haiku tradition of fidelity to nature and to everyday experience⁵ than to the systematic realism of Zola. We would argue that Sōseki, by deliberately going back in literary history, discovered in Austen’s novels features which he could fuse more creatively with the traditional Japanese literary sensibility.

Sōseki’s high valuation of Austen was taken up by the couple Nogami Toyochirō (1883-1950) and his wife, Nogami Yaeko (1885-1985), both members of the Sōseki circle. Toyochirō was the first translator of Jane Austen. His was the version of *Pride and Prejudice* mentioned above that came out in 1926. Nogami Yaeko had a more remarkable career, with several novels to her name, finally achieving the status of the grand dame of Japanese literature. Sōseki helped her as a young woman to find her way as a novelist by lending her his copies of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, in the original English. Nogami also proofread her husband’s translation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Thus she already knew this work thoroughly by the time she began work on her first full-length novel, *Machiko* (1928-30), an attempt to extend *Pride and Prejudice* toward social fiction in a story of modern industrial Japan, then in the throes of economic crisis and workers’ militancy. *Machiko* the heroine, a spirited, Elizabeth Bennet-like figure, wavers in her feelings toward a conscientious and cultured industrialist and toward a revolutionary activist who is blatantly unscrupulous in his zeal for the cause; her dilemma calls forth the full force of Nogami’s moral analysis. Nogami’s adaptation of Jane Austen provides an excellent example of what an intelligent and socially aware Japanese woman writer could make of Austen’s kind of domestic realism. The significance of her work will be more fully discussed later, in Section 2, by [Hisamori](#).

With the end of the second World War, Japan returned to a renewed national endeavor to adopt the Western model. One of the manifestations of this effort was an extraordinary burst of literary translation in the post-war years. Jane Austen, hitherto represented by only one translation, the *Pride and Prejudice* of 1926, was one obvious beneficiary of this boom. The translation of *Sense and Sensibility* came out in 1947, quickly followed by a new translation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1950, which enjoyed a large circulation because it was issued by a prestigious publishing house, Iwanami, as part of its highbrow paperback library. This edition by Iwanami was seen as the seal of approval by the Japanese cultural establishment on Jane Austen. Within the next half century, as we noted earlier, all her writings—including the minor works, the juvenilia, and even the letters—were translated, the last of the canon to appear being *Mansfield Park* in 1978 (as might be expected, given its sometimes too overt moral tone).

It was also in these post-war years that academic studies of Jane Austen came into their own. Austen is now one of the most frequently taught of the



The Iwanami Library *Pride and Prejudice*.

English writers in Japan, and Japanese scholars continue to produce studies of Jane Austen that take account of the newest work done in the rest of the world. These developments finally led Japan's Austen scholars to form the Jane Austen Society of Japan in 2007. Today, then, Jane Austen's reputation is firmly established, the cultural catching-up process is complete, and Japan's sense of belatedness has gradually disappeared.

Another result of her growing fame is that Jane Austen has come out of the classroom and entered the general forum of literary opinion. As more translations became available, writers and literary critics began to discuss Austen for the general reading public, not always with accurate knowledge but often with love and insight. Thus, in 1963, the noted haiku critic Yamamoto Kenkichi, in an influential essay titled "The Smile of *Pride and Prejudice*" chides the humorless solemnity and narrowness of much Japanese fiction, praising Austen's "natural ease" and social openness: "Collins, Wickham, Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine, how she turns her laughter on these minor characters. They are observed with some malice, certainly, but in a pleasant, mischievous, irreverent manner which ultimately accords salvation to even these fools" (52).

Yamamoto tries to show the balance between Austen's "malice" and her tolerance, but seems to incline toward the benign. The quality of Austen's humor has always been a problem with Japanese readers, and some credit her with too much kindness. But haiku poetry is based on a certain blocking-off of ordinary human sentiments that gives a cool objectivity even to the most sensitive portrayal of nature. It also results in a humorous take on life. The extremely restrained, minimalist variety of domestic realism exemplified by the great film director Ozu Yasujiro (1903-63) may be seen as one version of the haiku-style realism of everyday life that Natsume Soseki envisaged when he extolled the virtues of Austen's realism. It is possible to discover many points of contact between Ozu's scripts, centered on dialogue and with very spare background notation, and Soseki's view of Austen's art.⁶ We suggest that Jane Austen, through Soseki, had a hand, albeit indirectly, in the formation of this peculiarly Japanese style.⁷

Our survey ends with a very different, deliberately experimental writer. Kurahashi Yumiko (1935-2005) started her literary career in the 1960s, steeped in the post-war French literature of Sartre and Camus.⁸ Her early stories are absurdist fantasies, sometimes quite grotesque and violent, in which characters are given no proper names but are merely labeled, like Kafka's characters, with letters of the alphabet, such as K or L or Q. She won great acclaim with these tales of enigmatic irrationality and became a cult figure among the young intellectuals of the time. But later, in mid-career, she began to turn to the classics of both Japanese and Western literature to give stability and polish to her fiction. For these rococo stories of elegant libertinism she sought inspiration both from the novels of Jane Austen and from classical Japanese novels, in particular *The Tale of Genji*.

This is particularly true of *Yume no ukihashi* (*The Bridge of Dreams*, 1971), a novel which, against a very traditional backdrop of cultured Japanese life, tells the story of Keiko, a female student who is writing a graduate thesis about Jane Austen. The title is taken from the last book of *The Tale of Genji*, and the story ends, as in an Ozu film (or an Austen novel, for that matter), with the heroine's marriage. The narrative unfolds in the same upper-class milieu as provides the quiet background to many films of Ozu. On the surface, this is Japanese domestic realism at its most traditional and serene. But this appearance is deceptive, as the films of Ozu often are, because Keiko discovers that her parents and the parents of her boyfriend have long been conducting a four-sided relationship and realizes that there is a possibility that she and her boyfriend are brother and sister. Later, in Section 3, [Ebine](#) will have more to say about the role of Jane Austen, or at least Kurahashi's understanding of her, in this paradoxical novel of extreme decorum and sexual transgression. Kurahashi argued that these two elements are compatible, and she experimented to combine them. In our opinion Kurahashi succeeds brilliantly in creating a very modern cross of the Austen novel and the classic Japanese novel.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper Japanese names are given in the Japanese style, i.e. surname first and given name last. Japanese authors are referred to by their surnames. The exception is Natsume Soseki, who, like Matsuo Basho before him, followed the Chinese tradition of adopting a pen name based on classical Chinese literature. In accordance with this convention, he is better known by his pen name than his surname and therefore we call him Soseki rather than Natsume.

2. Hogan and Brodey state that Soseki's appreciation of Austen is skewed because of "an ignorance of key biographical facts about Austen" on his part. They base this allegation on a quotation from a book of reminiscence about Soseki written by Morita Sōhei, one of his protégés. In their translation of Morita's text, Soseki is made to remark, "*Pride and Prejudice* is a novel by a wife who was able to write in her spare time between tending children and peeling potatoes" (Hogan and Brodey). This translation is incorrect since they drop the crucial word "yōna" (like, as if). Through this omission, what should have been a figurative sentence, "Austen's novels (not *Pride and Prejudice* as in Hogan and Brodey) are like those written by a wife" or "Austen's novels read as if they were written by a wife" has been turned into a literal statement. Hogan and Brodey are quite right to point out the traditional Confucian bias that some Japanese readers have brought to their reading of Austen. But attributing it to mere ignorance in this case is seriously misleading about the level and extent of Soseki's knowledge of English literature.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Japanese texts have been translated by the authors.

3. The literary histories of Kato and Keene allude to this question at every turn. The best work in English specifically devoted to it is Karatani.
4. For a list of Sōseki's works translated into English see the bibliography in Keene (3:352-54). An important addition to Sōseki in English is the publication of his *Bungakuron (Theory of Literature)* in 2009.
5. See the groundbreaking essay of Eto, quoted and discussed by Karatani (61-65).
6. In writing a script for a film it was Ozu's practice to start from dialogue. Only when a sufficient number of speeches from various characters were amassed did he embark on a story to best accommodate them (Richie 22-25). In this connection it is interesting that Sōseki, when he quoted the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* for high praise in his *Theory of Literature* (107-20), omitted the famous opening passage and the final authorial put-down of Mrs. Bennet, concentrating on the dialogue between the Bennets. Richie also aligns Ozu with Jane Austen in this way: "His opinion of human nature was in this sense so high, his curiosity and interest in people so great, that he denied himself the undoubted convenience of story, plot, and conventional dialogue. In this, Ozu joins a few, very few, other artists with similar convictions and working methods: Jane Austen, Anton Chekhov, Naoya Shiga, Henry Green, Kafu Nagai, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and perhaps a few others" (25).
7. See Hogan and Brodey's excellent discussion of Soseki's marginal notes to Austen's novels. They argue, we think quite correctly, that terms used by Sōseki, such as "tame," "insipid," or "monotonous" may not have been wholly negative.
8. See entry "Kurahashi Yumiko" in Mulhern (199-205).

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